

Chapter 69 - Nice Catch Up

Grugg awoke with a start, his single eye blearily trying to focus on his surroundings. He was sitting against a wooden wall, and in front of him, bathed in the early morning sunlight, was Claudia lying on the bed of his safehouse room. Half-formed memories of the previous night slid around in his head like uncooked eggs.

Welcome to the land of the living, Grugg. Everything is fine - Claudia is okay, you are mostly recovered, Gregor and Peony haven't killed each other arguing through the night. Normally I would suggest taking a day off, but with the Captain presumably still missing, it doesn't look like we'd get the chance.

The sparks of the wizard's words brought back the sinking feeling of all the weight from the day before. The giant skulls, Blackjack stealing Don Kean's box, the Captain being kidnapped - or worse, and the attack on Claudia. Despite the efforts of Bart to heal and remove the lingering curse, he still ached and felt tired. Stretching out his arms, he yawned and immediately tried to stifle it as the clothesmaker stirred in the bed.

Claudia turned onto her side and smiled at the cyclops. "Morning." She looked just as tired as he felt, and both her arms and most of her torso were wrapped in bandages, a comfortable shirt and trousers replacing her usual dress-based outfit whilst she recovered.

"Feelin' okay?" Grugg asked, smiling back at her.

"I'm not dead yet. Thanks to you and Lady Valoth, of course."

'You did well in defending yourself too, Claudia.'

The clothesmaker rolled back onto her back and stared at the dark wooden ceiling. "It's so different when it's... people."

Grugg scratched his chin and tried to think of some supportive words. He knew what she meant, but as an outsider to normal civilised worlds, it was not a moral issue he often had to contend with.

"Adventure not only about conquest over monster," he began, letting the words form slowly, "But conquest over what is wrong."

'Grugg is right. Taking a path of heroics will invite opposition from everything, even fate itself. To truly adventure is to take that in stride and rise above it.'

Claudia softly sighed and closed her eyes. "I know; I just hadn't imagined it would involve murdering people in my shop."

"Grugg only murder two people, for sure." The Detective smiled as he counted his fingers. Or was it more? The Demon probably didn't count, and most of the other Nightshade he had just maimed, he thought.

"I didn't think you'd come, as you were locked away. It turns out you are a pretty dependable guy, Detective." She opened her eyes and turned back to him with a smile.

Grugg grinned and flushed slightly; he hadn't been called pretty before. "Grugg have some good friends that helped. And Patson."

"Peony filled me in on some of the details when she changed some of my dressings earlier; you really got her to join us?"

'Grugg's charisma knows no bounds, although she has said it is a temporary measure.'

"And Gregor thinks the assassins were part of Dogman's gang?"

'Correct, or at least they smelt like it? It's certainly not out of the realms of possibility.'

Grugg stood, his stomach growling for attention. He hadn't eaten since the Dungeon, and those potions from the previous night had multiplied his hunger. "Want get food, Claudia?"

"Sure, let's start the day right."

The pair made their way down the stairs, with the cyclops having to squeeze through the doorways and avoid falling down the steep decline. A wave of dread passed over him as he remembered that Raulo was killed in here somewhere. Pushing open the door to the main living room, the early sun softly lit up all the wooden furniture.

Sitting at the dining table was Gregor, feet up on the surface next to a steaming mug of what Grugg hoped was coffee, as he scribbled in his notepad. Laying on the couch near the noticeboard area was a sleeping Lady Valoth.

"Morning," Gregor offered, his glare softening slightly at the sight of the lethargic pair. "You'll be happy to know there were no attempted incursions during our watch; ser Door is no doubt an additional deterrent."

"Barry?" Grugg asked before looking at the front door. It was larger than before, and this side of it did resemble the rear side of the sentient door they had found in the Dungeon...

'You did seem to be very out of it last night; you don't remember coming back to see Barry as our safehouse door? Apparently, some kind of contract magic-'

Lady Valoth stirred from her slumber and pushed herself up, putting her round glasses on. "Oh, you're all up... and noisy. Glad to see you are both looking healthier."

"Thank you again," Claudia nodded and went to take a seat at the table with the ratman.

"I'll put us all on some coffee," Gregor folded away his notepad into his jacket and left the room.

Grugg stood awkwardly in the middle of the room, ruminating on all the information and where to start next.

"Gregor and I gave the house a look over," Peony said, filling the brief silence. "Since this is a murder scene and all. You'd think they'd want it kept secure, but I no longer have any surprise in me for the lack of ability the local Guard display."

“Any good clues?” The Detective frowned, scouring the floor for evidence.

“Not exactly,” the Investigator straightened out the wrinkles in her black dress as she stood from the couch, “It doesn’t appear he was killed in the safehouse. No signs of struggle, arterial blood sprays and the like; more likely, he was just dumped here - potentially via magical means.”

‘Teleportation? I’m not sure we have met anyone capable of that yet... maybe a scroll or item, however.’

Gregor entered back into the room from the kitchen, laden with three steaming mugs, one of which was extra large. The ratman passed one to each of the other Private Eyes before returning to his own. “Ser Grugg, why don’t you lead a team meeting?”

Grugg nodded and stood by the criminal board on the wall; he took a moment to compose his thoughts and review the information they had gained in the last day, as the team came to sit before the board. His Deputy brought out a pencil to write anything important down.

“First,” the cyclops began, “Don Kean now dead.” He pointed at the sheet displaying the name of the Nightshade boss. “Blackjack stole Don Kean special box, which is *important*.”

Gregor passed him a sheet of paper, a stinky-looking skull next to a box, which the cyclops pinned to the side of the board.

“Next, Dogman sent criminals to hurt Claudia,” pointing at the Dogman sheet, he scowled for emphasis.

Lady Valoth raised her hand. “Gregor and I intend to question the criminal apprehended last night for more information.”

Grugg nodded; that sounded acceptable. “No clues on other Nightshade bosses yet,” he reviewed the board. “Other items that are important: Giant Skulls...” Gregor passed him a piece of paper with a frowning skull on, “...and Bart’s brother’s murder.” The ratman handed him a slip with a sad-looking hat next to a hat with crosses for eyes.

‘My brother wasn’t a hat, you know.’

“Wait, wait,” Peony waved her hands. “Are you telling me that you are Barthelemy?”

‘Oh, I thought Gregor would have filled you in?’

“Not my business to tell,” the ratman folded his arms and looked away from the group.

‘Yes, my alleged poisoning was a lie; I actually now inhabit this hat and have been vaguely regaining my powers over time. I asked Grugg to help me investigate the murder. That’s how we are all in this mess.’

“I see,” Peony folded her fingers together and pursed her lips. “That certainly explains... things. Raulo could sense the magic coming off of it... you? I suppose that’s one less mystery for me to solve.”

"I read the autopsy report since ser Hat didn't care to," Gregor shrugged, "It says poisoning; it might be worth seeing who bent the fingers of the person who wrote it."

"Oh! And also Raulo murderer and Captain missing," Grugg remembered, taking a quickly scribbled rendition of a sad-looking half-orc face from the ratman to stick to the board. "Grugg will investigate this one today."

"I'll come too," Claudia offered. "I'm mostly recovered, and you can't leave me here alone."

Grugg went to disagree but then yielded, "If Claudia thinks okay, then okay."

'I don't have any Detection spells other than for Magic, but I am fully charged and will help out as best I can.'

"I feel like these skulls are a big part of things," the muted grey eyes behind the spectacles worn by Peony scanned the board. "Possibly something that ties a lot of the Nightshade activity together. But I'm not sure where Harlan ties into this."

'Since we weren't able to find his assistant, as the scope of the mystery deepens, I am wondering if it has anything to do with his adventuring days.'

Grugg nodded. "Peony said Lord X might be coming Helpart?"

"Speculation at this point, but the meet-up with Gravestone, which I had spoken to you about, has now been cancelled. With the rate at which their bosses have been coming undone down here, I can only imagine either Lord X is coming to sort out the mess himself or is sending someone of great import to do the dirty work."

"They should be quieter on the whole for a bit," Gregor added, still looking away at the wall, "Infighting and power struggles and trying not to look weak after their failed attacks against us this week. Should give us a brief reprieve."

"Time for food and Detective work then," Grugg's eyes lit up as they all shared their agreements and drank their coffee.

Having slept in his clothes, it did not take the cyclops long to get ready, and Gregor and Peony were first to leave whilst he waited for Claudia to change into something more investigative. He was almost jealous that he wasn't going to go question the criminal, but perhaps wanting to intimidate people all the time wasn't a healthy mindset. Nevertheless, the thoughts of the Captain gnawed at his empty stomach.

There was a slight bit of guilt there that they hadn't gone out straight away to look for Wanu, but it would have done more harm than good in the state they were in. He fiddled with the straps of his sling for Thud, it wasn't like him to be nervous, but the last day had been pretty intense.

I worry about those skulls. What is their purpose, and why do the Nightshade want them? How many of them are there? Did my brother have something to do with it? Sorry, so many questions.

The Detective sighed and closed his eye, trying to focus on the food they were about to get. He opened it at the sound of Claudia opening the stairway door; she was wearing a long sleeve dress of a red floral pattern over a leather jerkin, enough to cover over all of her bandages. A broad dark brown belt encircled her waist, with a couple of pouches and The Storm affixed to the sides. On her back, her shield was slung, the weighty object having been ashamedly absent when needed the night before.

“Sorry,” she brushed her red curls from her face, “I had to soak some blood from my gloves. Grugg, have you ever looked into what was in the basement?”

The Detective opened his mouth but closed it without an answer. The rumbling of nerves and hunger slowly turned into curiosity at the question.

‘Patson said there was something about it, right?’

The clothesmaker bit her lip. “Not wanting to distract from our task, but what if they hid the Captain right under our noses?”

‘The other two didn’t mention if they had looked into the basement last night. I’m sure they did, but won’t hurt if we take a quick double check too?’

Grugg sighed in resignation.

“Okay, can’t hurt to check,” he repeated.