

Chapter 72 - Mysterious Roots

'Spark'

Grugg groaned as he lifted himself from the pile of broken wooden planks, dust flitting about the air like a swarm of lazy flies. An errant shard of plank standing almost vertical lit slightly, the small flame bringing some light to their new location. The brief patter of rain broke through whatever remained of the lumber house, dotting the debris-ridden area.

"Claudia?" He turned, with brief panic, as he rose to his feet with splintered shards of the building falling from his large body.

"I'm okay- *ahh*," the clothesmaker winced as a gash that ran along her cheek to her ear flared up with pain. A small rivulet of blood ran down her face, mixing with the sawdust and dirt they had accumulated in their descent. "My leg is a little numb too, but nothing broken. I think one of the wolf bodies broke my fall." She stood gingerly, her leg caked with blood, a mass of dark grey fur matted with crimson beneath her.

"Here," the Detective withdrew a small glass bottle and tossed it to his partner in this venture, "Take Grugg healing potion." As Claudia caught it, the cyclops glared around for signs of the Nightshade boss.

Grugg looked up. Not only had they fallen through the top floor but also the ground floor as well, now finding themselves in an assumed basement. It was a simple square shape, compacted dirt reinforced by darker wooden beams - better quality than all of the house above them. The Detective kicked some planks out of the way and retrieved his club from the pile of debris. Then, lifting it high, the Moonchaser Orb pulsed out a white light from the centre of Thud's metal cap.

Two things were highlighted as the energy withdrew. The first was a trail of blood leading up the wall and back into the house. Perhaps more important and obvious, as his eye adjusted, was the metal doorway on one side of this basement room. The sound of a cork popping out of a bottle signalled Claudia was taking the potion as he squatted down to observe the blood trail in the faint light.

'Can't say much for certain; the assumption would be he recovered quicker than us and escaped, tail between his legs.'

"But we are going to go into the door, right?" The clothesmaker asked, stepping over beside the Detective, her wound already on the way to being healed. She withdrew The Storm from the plank it had become embedded in from the motion of their fall and sheathed the large needle away.

"Seems important," Grugg nodded as he slung Thud away and checked his arm. He had thought it just stung from the wolf bites, but there were also two wooden shards stuck in him too. With a grunt, he pulled them out, scowling at the rivers of dark crimson criss-crossed down his arm.

'Healing Pulse.'

A wave of energy passed within him, bringing a warmth to the ends of his limbs and soothing the wounds, closing them up slightly. "Thanks, Bart."

I'll give some Healing Ward while we have some downtime too.

The Detective walked up to the door and squatted down to give it a good look over. Simple in design, a plain metal doorway with some kind of lock. No further detailing or story to tell - however...

"Huh, that looks pretty much exactly the same as our safehouse basement door?" Claudia stood beside him, frowning at the door with a tilted head.

Grugg stood and shrugged, a smile crossing his wide face. "Don't live here, though."

His heavy boot kicked out against the barrier preventing their investigations, the steel clanking noisily against the metal object. It buckled slightly but did not relent. With a huff, the cyclops took a few steps backwards and a short run before the second strike. The resulting echo of the reverberating clang travelled down a long passageway, as did the collapsed door. As it rocked briefly in place on the floor a dozen feet from the entryway, now mishappen beyond use, Grugg hoped nothing with ears lived down here.

"There are torches... no, some other form of light ahead," the clothesmaker peered from behind the Detective.

Some form of magically imbued light-stone, they last a very long time.

Grugg stepped into the tunnel, thankful at least that it was wide enough to accommodate his size without too much struggle. Reaching the first apparently magical light, he glared up at it. It had the appearance of a fancy gemstone, hewn with many facets - but it was dull and clear on the outside where a pale blueish light emanated from within it. It wasn't particularly pretty, but it seemed to do the job well enough, just like him.

After about thirty feet of this passageway, it then branched off into two open rooms to either side, with a doorway inset straight ahead. Grugg awkwardly withdrew Thud from his sling once more, trying not to scrape it across the walls or ceiling - to some success.

"Grugg jump into left door, Claudia jump into right door," he whispered, a nod given in response.

With a low amount of poise and elegance, he jumped into his doorway; Thud pointed out in accusation of whoever may be lurking within. Which, as it so happened, was no one. Some kind of storage room now found itself before his wrath, and it did little in opposition to his abrupt presence. Grugg turned to see if Claudia had worse luck, but the clothesmaker turned back to him and shrugged.

"Your room empty too?" She whispered, lowering her shield.

The cyclops nodded and gestured for her to come into the storeroom. As an adventurer, an empty room might be a hard pass and an excuse to move on. But as a Detective, this room could be filled with clues as to where they were and who else was hidden away. He

reasoned with himself that it might even have food in it, thinking back to the similar situation in the yeti caves. He was pretty sure that was months back, but no, it had been a week, maybe. It was hard to tell when you didn't really care for calendars.

Under the light of the pale blue gemstones, they began investigating the room. The far wall was stacked with various crates - hardy wooden containers, whereas the two side walls had half-full shelving. Grugg walked past the nearest shelves towards the containers, hoping that they contained the coveted edible items.

"Hmm," Claudia frowned as she walked along behind the cyclops, "These are all clothes, heavy-duty trousers and shirts. Some boots too."

"Looks like what lumberyard workers wore," Grugg agreed. "But no trees underground."

There is definitely something... well, I was going to say Nightshade-y about this place. Somewhat obvious, though.

"This must be why the Guard didn't find anything about the missing Captain here," Claudia began, "Do you think he is being kept down here in this secret base?"

"If Captain is, Grugg will find him."

The Detective reached the end of the room and grabbed the closest crate, popping open the heavy lid to gaze inside. Tools. He grunted and shut it again, not even caring anymore to check any of the other disappointing boxes. This clearly was just a room to outfit the workers, and he wasn't going to spend all day doing an itinerary on everything here.

"What was in other room?"

"Looked like bunk beds. All empty before you ask." The clothesmaker idly touched at her face where the injury had mostly healed, resisting the urge to scratch at the healing skin.

"Did they have little boxes by bottom that Grugg can break open?"

"Ah, I think so?" Claudia shrugged.

"For clues," Grugg clarified, just thinking about hidden away food.

They walked their way out of the store room and into what was possibly some form of dorm for the workers. Rows of beds stacked two tall lined most of the room's length, enough for two, maybe three, dozen people to sleep. Indeed, at the foot of some of the bunk beds were small chests. At the far end of the room, three cupboards stood, hiding potentially boring things like not-food.

"Claudia check cupboards," he nodded as the assistant, trying to think of a better title for the Private Eye.

As she walked across the room, Grugg knelt down by the first box. It was not locked and opened freely, a couple of pieces of clothing and a neat-looking rock the only contents within. He picked up the rock to have a better look - it was similar to some of the chunks of

ore the yeti had been digging out, a lump of rough bronze-coloured stone that reflected the light in interesting ways.

Not magical.

Grugg pocketed it anyway and moved on to the second box. This one was locked! Excitement built within him at the possibilities of what could be hidden away in secret. He picked the dark wooden chest up off the floor and pulled against the locking mechanism, trying to force it open. With a brief moment of pained resistance, the wood eventually gave up and split, causing the container to burst open and spread the contents over the floor. A silver saucer bounced on the stone floor, the tinny noise echoing in the chamber.

They both winced as the cyclops ashamedly looked through the other assortment of bits that had fallen out. Some other cutlery, a diary, clothing, and a small sack of gold. All very dull - oh wait, the diary might be interesting. He sat on the floor and lifted the book above his face so that the wizard could read it.

Turn.

The Detective shuffled around slightly.

No, I meant the page.

Grugg flipped a page and then a second at the wizard's prompting. After the third, his arms were getting tired, some lethargy from the remnants of the curse rearing its ugly head once more. Thankfully that seemed to be enough for Bart to give his verdict.

Mostly personal stuff about how the worker felt that day and unrequited love. It seems that they have been down here quite a while, at least.

Claudia moved over to the seated Detective as he groaned and dropped the book. "Nothing much over here either. Usual living quarters type of stuff. My question is, why?"

"Why workers living under house?"

"Yeah, obviously there is something that they are hiding - for *them* to be hiding."

Grugg stood up as he pondered this, smiling at the clothesmaker. "Will find out soon."

"Do you think we should tell anyone about this?"

The Detective frowned, an even more difficult question than the last thought. Maybe not the Guard, but he did have the Message Stone for Lady Valoth. With a nod to Claudia, he pulled out the hopefully correct one and gave it a tap.

"Private Eyes. Grugg and Claudia under lumberyard house. Maybe danger, no food."

"Oh, tell them about the wolves too."

"Also, Nightshade boss is a wolf."

[Valoth reporting. We are currently — you — assistance?]

Something is interfering with the Stone; it couldn't just be the distance.

Claudia brushed her hair out of her face with her hand. “They probably want to know if they need to come here.”

“Grugg and Claudia safe, will send message if danger.”

[Affirmative... -ctive. Stay safe.]

The cyclops grunted, realising he should have started with a knock-knock joke. It hadn't felt right giving the Lady a hard time after the murder of Raulo, and he was sure part of the reason she had agreed to join up with them was to have some support around her. Once they found out who killed the Investigator, he would start winding her up again. He rolled his tongue in his mouth, briefly considering that all of them had come together because of a need for support - but then quickly shooed that away; not enough things were being punched.

As if by fate, the soft sound of footsteps came from behind them as they both turned to the open entry to the dorm. Without giving them any chance to react, the middle door they had left for last swung open, and a grisled figure stepped through.

“So much noise must be the-” he paused as he stopped in the open doorway as his eyes caught an oddly dressed cyclops with a sheepish grin standing in the middle of the dorms.

He turned back to the doorway behind him and opened his mouth to yell.