

## Chapter 99 - Heart of Helpart

"This is fancy," the wizard cooed as they entered the gated community.

Neither of them had any previous need to come over this way, primarily due to not being welcome, but also, the thugs and criminals of Nightshade seemed to congregate in the seedy, grimy areas of the town instead.

A dozen large houses, more ornately built than the rest of the town, sat in a street of their own. Windows with beautifully shaped frames, well-managed gardens of beautifully vibrant flowers, and even the wooden structure themselves seemed to be made of higher-quality trees. Perhaps just the finishing on them was nicer, Grugg reasoned, having not seen any trees more impressive than their kin.

They followed the road around, which was paved instead of cobbled until they aligned with a signpost showing the number Eight. The house itself did not stand out amongst the similar opulent designs of those around it. If it was indeed the lair of the fallen criminal boss, it did little to show it. Grugg walked the pathway to the door with the other two in tow.

He rapped his knuckles on the door gently. "Knock knock," he whispered, before turning immediately to the others, "Nope, nobody home!"

"No. No breaking and entering," Peony shook her head before relenting, "Well, entering - but do it quietly. The neighbours will be watching."

Grugg watched as the wizard withdrew the pair of keys from his pocket and tried the plainer silver one.

Bart shook his head.

With an animated yawn, the cyclops leaned his weight into the door. It creaked and complained before the lock popped out from the wall, only damaging the door slightly.

"Nice to be in a place with windows," Bart echoed the Detective's earlier thought. Even with the lightly overcast sky still covering the town, there was still plenty of light to illuminate the interior of the building.

A decorated rug spanned the length of the entryway leading to a spiralling staircase that rose to a second floor. An open archway to the left of this corridor looked to lead to a dining room, with a closed door beside the stairs that went to the back of the house. Along the right wall, various pictures were hung, and a grandfather clock sat silently.

"What's the betting that there are magical traps, and I am unable to detect them?" Bart scowled with a sour expression on his face.

Peony rolled her eyes, withdrawing a wand from a backpack and passing it to the wizard. "Here, you can at least look the part. Three uses left."

Bart held the wand out and continued his scowl, a sharp zap of purple energy flying out the tip of the wand. "Bah, it's not the same." He pocketed the wand and shrugged. "The clock is trapped, as is the third stair, and something in the room beyond."

"Grugg can fix that" The cyclops stepped forward and booted the grandfather clock, denting the wood and sending it flying onto the stairs.

A burst of fire coursed from the face of the clock as spikes of purple energy jutted upwards from the third step - splintering the tall timepiece in half and ending the flames.

"Let's not do that again," Lady Valoth narrowed her eyes at the Detective.

"Not that I hate to take the detective work out of being a Detective, but we could just use the Moonchaser Orb again to see if the box or a large skull is here?" Bart stood still, frowning at the mess Grugg had made.

"Honestly, if you didn't keep falling into opportune situations, I would have just hired you on as muscle instead. You seem to do a lot better when the problem involves punching or destroying-"

The pulse of white light enveloped the house, cutting off the Investigator's rant as they both looked at the cyclops holding the club sheepishly. Grugg looked up, down, and all around himself before meeting their gaze.

"Skull in the floor, far away."

Barthelemy groaned. "Fifty-fifty the box is in the bedroom, then?"

"Race, Bart!" Grugg wiggled his eyebrow as he leapt for the staircase.

Lady Valoth followed them, rubbing her temples with a clenched jaw.

"See, suspicious." The wizard pointed to the heavy padlock on the presumed bedroom door on the second floor.

"Ineffective," Grugg agreed, putting his fist through the wooden wall and rendering the lock useless. He gave the door a quick kick for good measure, sending it opening quickly.

"Hopefully there aren't more traps," Peony muttered from slightly further down the hall, just in case.

The cyclops hopped into the room, Thud drawn and ready for danger. By all accounts, it was the least threatening room he had stepped into for a long while. The double bed was resplendent, and it took a lot of willpower for him not to go try it out. A closed writing desk sat by a large window that looked out to the town below, opposite the bed. Perhaps most interestingly, beside a cupboard was an iron safe.

"Box inside box?" Grugg questioned out loud, pointing the dull end of his club at the unassuming metal container.

"It's where I would put it," Bart entered and looked over the safe. "It has a combination lock on it - a series of four numbers."

"If either of you suggest fifty-fifty, I will end your careers where you stand," Peony scowled at the pair as the wizard slowly removed his hand from the safe.

"What Lady think then?" Grugg shrugged and allowed himself to sit at the edge of the bed. It was divine.

"Five, One, Five, Zero."

The wizard rolled the numbers around, and as the last one clicked into place, the safe sounded out a clunk. "Something we missed?" He turned to the smirking Investigator with a raised brow.

"The terrible poem Gravestone had wasn't just an allegory for the tenets of the organisation. Nightshade flowers generally have five petals, which bloom into a singular fruit. Held aloft by many is the five-boss-to-one overseer ratio they like to use. Then finally, 'none to benefit' is just zero."

"Almost fifty-fifty then," the cyclops beamed, patting the wizard on the back.

Peony narrowed her eyes at the Detective, the red glow showing through the glasses that usually muted their true colour.

The small door of the safe swung open and Bart peered inside. Several books and stacks of paper were withdrawn, but finally, the jewel-encrusted box they had taken from Don Kean's dungeon was taken, Bart standing as he held it.

"That almost killed Grugg," the cyclops swung his legs back and forth as he sat.

They watched as the wizard placed the box on the cupboard next to it and withdrew the set of keys. The golden one with the jewel fit snugly, and the box became unlatched with a click.

"Wow, I think I'll need a chair for this," Bart exhaled deeply as the Investigator moved over the one from the writing desk. "This is a book written by... Harlan."

"Read at your own pace; let us know when you have it all put together. I am going to go through this other paperwork. Grugg... just don't break anything else."

"Grugg's on it!" The Detective replied, lying back in the bed. It only creaked and complained a little.

Minutes passed, with only the sound of pages turning and the occasional sigh of the wizard filling the room. Grugg just stared at the ceiling and contemplated how he could take this bed with him after.

"Alright," Bart eventually said, "are you all ready for the exposition explaining most of the rest of the mystery in Helpart?"

They both turned to him and nodded.

“The Five Great Ancients were discovered by my brother, Harlan, and his adventuring group. They are a source of great power, but also protect an ancient artefact known as the Heart of Mubet.”

“Ooh, can we get it?” Grugg’s eye widened, thinking of what great a magic item it must be.

“No. To clarify, they deemed it to be either evil or too uncontrollable to be wielded by a mortal. He is intentionally vague about what it actually did, perhaps to dissuade anyone from trying to find it. Or them - they know of two other artefacts of similar power.”

“The Mind and the Soul of Mubet?” Peony sat on the side of the bed and frowned.

“You know of them?”

“Stories. Centuries-old, the three magical artefacts of some long lost hero - or villain. They were only rumoured to exist, though, this is proof?”

“As much proof as reasonably possible,” the wizard shrugged, trying to get the pieces stuck in his head. “The skulls are some kind of lock to access it. They are also powerful magic in their own right, and... the adventuring group each bound their souls to each of the skulls.”

“What?” Both the cyclops and goliath said together.

“It doesn’t add up - as there were only four of them, right? Remember we discussed this previously, Grugg? But it says here - ‘each five of us bound our souls to each lock so that they could not be opened while we still draw breath.’ - with my brother dead, I wonder if that’s what caused Don Kean his end?”

“Either way, it would do us well to find the rest of his party - and if they are still alive.” Peony took out her folder and started making notes.

“Against better judgement, he had also written the potential locations of the Mind and Soul artefacts...”

“Grugg guess one is Galeden?”

“Right, the Mind. That would explain the increase in Nightshade activity, right Peony?”

“It could,” she tapped her pencil against the edge of the black folder, “but what about the Soul?”

“Loathen - the Captial.”

“Hells, so the chances are that Lord X might be there are-”

“Fifty-fifty,” Grugg beamed.

“Alright, that phrase is now banned,” she shook her head but smiled.

“There are no details on the Mind, whether it is similarly guarded by Great Ancient skulls or not. Hopefully, it isn’t underground - I’m getting tired of that.”

“Same,” Grugg agreed.

“So, in summary, the Nightshade must have had a whiff of these forgotten secrets - and that my brother knew something about them. They killed him for the secrets, and perhaps they are still hunting down his other party members to unlock the skulls. All to gain this supposed great power which no doubt the mysterious Lord X wants because... power?”

“Many men have killed for less.”

“Many Grugg, too,” the cyclops confirmed.

“It’s both overwhelming and unsatisfying,” Bart sighed, closing his eyes, “I don’t know who else was part of murdering Harlan, and now we know for sure there are more Nightshade sects trying to delve into dangerous magic that they don’t understand.”

“So what do you plan on doing about it?” The Investigator crossed her arms.

The wizard stood up and placed his palms on the top of the cupboard, burning energy in his tired eyes. “I’m going to track down every Nightshade boss and dismantle them until I find and kill everyone responsible for this.”

“Just add ‘in a legally justifiable context,’ and you’ve got my full support,” Peony smiled.

“Grugg help too, on one condition.”

“Of course, friend. What is it?”

“I forgot. Oh! Couple days rest before go Galeden.” He rolled over on the bed and put his hands under his chin.

“That’s down to our supervisor here.”

Lady Valoth tilted her head in contemplation. “Certainly. It will take a couple of days to prepare a wagon and get everything tied up here. Some of this paperwork will help the case for all the various operations here, along with connecting threads spreading throughout Mubet.”

“Let’s go home then?” Bart smiled at the cyclops, tucking Harlan’s book under his arm.

“You need to work on getting your powers back,” Peony frowned at him and stood to collect her papers. “I doubt you have fixed that dummy yet so that it can attack me back?”

“I did not-”

“Or at least make use of your new skills,” she tutted. “Who are you going to kill first - and how?”

“Why do people keep asking me that? You’ll give me performance anxiety.”