

Chapter 45 - Road to Nowhere

He is coming this way?

Grugg grunted and stared back towards the town gates. They were still visible despite them being somewhat off of the main route, but other than the occasional wagon moving into the city he couldn't make out much from this distance. Of course, they could run back to the gate, but by the time they got there, Fixion may have already passed through - or gone a different route altogether. The man may have been a brute, but he wasn't likely to escape from jail only to run straight towards the Guards on gate duty.

"Plan, ser Detective?" The ratman looked up at Grugg and adjusted his coat, allowing easier access to his whip if needed.

Technically this is probably more of a Guard issue - we are investigators primarily, not law enforcement. He is, however, part of our case and did try and kill us. So South may mean the lumber outpost, or it could not.

Stroking his chin, the cyclops looked back at the Deputy. "Where Gregor think criminal is going?"

"If I had just escaped imprisonment, the last place I would run to would be where I was employed. However, my last employment was a cover, so Fixion could have an alternative reason to go there."

A cover for what, spying on things with his Magic Eye- oh! That is how he found the odd food to bring to you for breakfast.

The Detective was too busy getting his head around the word 'employment' and didn't fully catch the wizard. "Uh, Grugg is hungry."

"Huh?" Gregor raised an eyebrow, tilting his head. "Focus, ser Grugg."

"Grugg thinks... Go see wood boss. If Fixion there, great - but if not, then maybe Thud can help." He patted the end of the club over his shoulder, eager to have a use for the weapon again, even if for investigative reasons.

Worst case scenario, we will get some answers one way or the other.

The ratman nodded, "And Hat agrees?"

"What hat?" Grugg turned and looked around with feigned confusion before allowing himself a congratulatory chuckle. "Yes. Bart just shy when around strangers," he waggled his eyebrow in the direction of the closest workers.

Gregor shrugged and rolled his eyes, before starting to head back to the Southbound road, with the cyclops soon in tow.

If it had been the peak of Spring, or even mid Summer, the walk would have been much more of a visual treat. Instead, the trees and bushes that flanked alongside the wide stone road were muted in colour even in the brief sunshine. Gnarled branches twisted overhead as mud-brown leaves left a decaying mulch in the gutters of the path ahead. Periodically a lantern post sprung up from the dirt beside the road, perhaps a saving grace during the dark nights, unless the shadows they cast amongst the barren forest would be spookier than no light at all.

Thankfully the mid-afternoon sun did not allow for the hint of ghosts and unknown horrors potentially lurking around them. Other than having to step aside for the odd cart heading into or out of Helpart, there were no signs of any Nightshade escapees or bad actors trailing them. Grugg had even set off the Moonchaser Orb, but nothing within the range had been outlined by the magic artefact.

Bart had spent the time working on his magic abilities and had been silent throughout the journey. Gregor just scowled at the daylight, seemingly unhappy with the efforts of the sun to avoid the rolling clouds on the windy day. The warmth generated from walking for most of the early day was briefly buffeted away every time the chill breeze blew through the more open landscape.

“Pretty sure we have gone further than a mile,” the ratman grumbled.

Grugg shrugged. “Think we lost?” He wasn’t aware of what a mile was but had hoped the wizard would have told him if something was wrong.

“We can’t be lost; we are following a single road in one direction. Whether we have missed the outpost, though...” Gregor stopped and looked around, his nose twitching. There had been no obvious side roads, signposted clearings, or really anything breaking up the monotony of the forest.

“Think Red lied to us?”

“I don’t see why. What reason could he have for sending us off further than-” Gregor stopped and spun round, hand on his whip. The Deputy hunched downwards and bared his fangs at the empty road leading back to town.

The Detective turned to look behind them as well, following the ratman’s gaze down the open space. “Anything you see, Bart?”

Let me focus... Hmm, there’s a very faint presence... it’s odd. Familiar, but I can’t exactly place what. Nothing visually though, same as you. Try using the Orb.

Grugg unslung Thud and gave the metal cap a slight tap on the stone road, the gentle clang soon followed by a wave of white light in the cyclops’ eye. As the light pulsed over the surrounding area before fading, a blurred outline fashioned itself around a shifting shape amongst the treeline.

“Grugg sees you!” he called with a grin, pointing in the direction of the assumed figure around forty feet away, causing it to stop in its tracks.

It looks like we were being followed, after all, by someone who can go invisible. I still can't pick up that magic signature though; the arcane presence is unusual.

"I should have known you wouldn't be so easy to surprise," the familiar voice called out as the outlined blur rose and moved closer to the road.

"Fixion," Gregor hissed, unclipping his whip and reaching inside his coat for his dagger.

Grugg smiled and rested his club across his shoulder, placing his other hand on his hip. His single electric-blue eye blazed in excitement as he watched the outline fade away as the Don Keans left (or right?) hand man shimmered into view.

"What a waste of a rune," the brute shook his head. Gone was his cloak; instead, a simple dark sleeveless grey jerkin and trousers were his only garments. Fully uncovered now, his arms appeared massively muscled, but most surprising of all were the runic symbols carved into his forearms.

Runes! That's why it felt so odd to me, how interesting that he has them built into his body.

The Detective watched as a single glowing rune slowly dimmed and went dark. Magic, runes especially, was not his speciality - but he knew from the Light rune they held that runes usually had limited use and needed to recharge in some manner. Given the announcement by the man, it was fair to say he had just used up an Invisibility rune.

"The shackles they use to nullify magic don't work quite the same on me," Fixion grinned, flexing his arms outwards.

"So you escaped just to come and get beaten up again?" Gregor growled, his tail extended and coiled low as if ready to help him spring forward.

"We were foolish, unprepared," the man shrugged. "Yarlen always got too cocky, told 'im you'd be more of a handful, that we couldn't take you out with a basic ambush."

"Almost did," Grugg shivered, the sour weight of his outburst sinking in his stomach.

"The Don would probably tell me not to go against you again, solo. But it's a matter of pride now." Fixion frowned at Gregor, "Sure, I woulda had my cloak taken when arrested, but by unmasking me in the street, you made it personal. Nightshade might not even take me back in, even if I finish the job now."

He is either extremely stupid, or those runes he has can do some serious work - be careful.

"Fixion wants to fight Grugg one-on-one?" The cyclops grinned and made a couple of test swings with Thud, the hum of displaced air from the large club causing his Deputy to flinch away.

Fixion returned the grin and assumed some kind of martial arts stance, raising his hands with open palms facing towards the Detective. "I had only used a small amount of my power that night, but now I will be going all out."

Gregor sighed and stood back up before walking to the side of the road. He took a seat on a small outcropping of dirt and folded his arms with a scowl. "If you lose this, ser Grugg, I will not be getting you breakfast tomorrow."

"Ya needn't bother because he will be dead. And you'll be next after, ratty," the criminal taunted as the Deputy rolled his eyes.

Grugg relaxed and turned to the ratman. "What about if Grugg wins?"

"What, you want a prize, or some incentive?" Somehow Gregor managed to scowl with greater intensity.

"Yeah. Grugg wants goat meat."

"...Okay, I will do my best." Gregor closed his eyes in resignation as the smile on the Detective's face grew wider.

Fixion clenched his teeth. "Are you quite done yet?"

'No, this is quite important; please be patient.'

"W-what was that?" His eyes widened at the odd hollow voice, the Nightshade operative slightly unnerved.

"Demon," the cyclops blurted out. "Eats soul of who Grugg defeats."

A little bit of mind games are always fun. Oh, just so you know, Light rune seems to recharge one use every day with a maximum of three charges. I've been considering some variants of the Healing Pulse spell, but no promises.

"Is ok," Grugg murmured to the hat whilst Fixion adjusted his stance, "Will just squish silly man quick."

"Are you done wasting time, Detective?" Fixion called, still almost thirty feet away on the road.

Gregor flipped out his notebook, pencil poised at the ready.

"Let's go!" Grugg cheered, holding Thud at the ready with a wild grin on his face.

Both combatants tensed and just stood in place for a few moments. These moments dragged on until an awkward patience developed. Finally, Gregor tapped his foot on the floor with a sigh as neither fighter made the first step.

Are you planning on going up to him so that you can hit him?

"Already walked a lot today," Grugg whined. "Fixion can come here."

"Hey! I broke out of jail and had to run here to catch you up," the Nightshade member complained right back at the half conversation he heard. "I had to use one of my Speed runes already." His lips clamped shut, realising he had said too much.

Invisibility and Speed. Judging from his arms, he may have at least four other runic abilities unless some are for extra charges or something. This is where I would be shrugging.

Grugg gave a sympathy shrug on the wizard's behalf as he lowered Thud in boredom.

Perhaps we can give Gregor the Message stone for Patson. It might be better to do it early rather than after the fact this time.

The Detective dug around in his pouches. Which one was it in, and where did he put the Patson stone compared to the Nightshade stone? He rummaged around with his left hand, finding some leftover dried meat and some paperwork he didn't have the stomach to look at, before eventually grasping at the small round magic stone. He lifted it out between his finger and thumb and went to toss it towards the Deputy.

"Oh no you don't," Fixion yelled - "**Speed.**"

The scraping of boots across the paving stones caught Grugg's attention as the man approached, the blazing glow of green light from one of the runes on Fixion's arm almost distracting the cyclops from reacting to how fast the distance was closing. He clasped the Message stone in his fist as he swung Thud around to meet the Nightshade spy.

A whoosh of air as the heavy swing missed the man; with his increased speed, he had been able to dodge the clumsy sideways swing easily and had rolled around to the other side of the Detective. A couple of unarmed blows against the meaty flank of the cyclops along the way before Fixion had to dodge backwards to avoid an elbow from the larger combatant.

Grugg grunted as he pivoted around, the strikes against him strong for a human, but almost unnoticeable for how hardy he was. Then, as he turned, he followed through with the momentum, swinging his club in a downward arc to strike Fixion after he dodged away.

The man stood and crossed his forearms in front of his face as Thud bore down on him.

"**Stone.**" His final word before the weight impact of the metal-capped weapon made contact.

A dull thrum of metal echoed out across the barren forest around them.

Still standing in place, Thud resting unmoved atop his arms, the eyes of the spy glowed bright green.

"Now it's my turn," Fixion growled.