

Chapter 64 - Scene Investigation

Grugg stepped into the room with a crunch beneath his heavy boots. He looked down and lifted his boot up. There were fragments of torn paper, aged and crumpled. Bits of glass and small shards of wood also seemed to have been spread across the room in some manner.

‘Spark’

Two wall lanterns lit up, illuminating the messy pit of an office. Unfortunately, two further lanterns were smashed or had decayed in a way that left them unusable - but with the inclusion of Gregor’s carried light source, there was plenty to truly show the scene that they had now stumbled across.

“Heavens above,” Claudia whispered, her voice stolen away from the shock. “Do you think that is...?”

Gregor shook his head. “I don’t see that as being possible. This place doesn’t look like it has seen activity for decades or more. Don Kean has been active only very recently?” His voice was hesitant, echoing the questions they all had running through their minds.

‘Let’s treat this as a crime scene. Detective, I suggest touching as little as possible until we are able to ascertain as much information as possible from this room.’

“Gregor, make notes,” the Detective ordered. “Claudia with Grugg.” His brow furrowed as he gingerly approached the desk of the dried-out corpse. It was humanoid, but many details were lost to time. The greying, filth-covered suit only offered that the owner was perhaps of a large size, horizontally. An agape look of shock was left on the desiccated body, empty sockets staring out towards the ceiling as it had slumped into the chair at an angle.

Check the desk; I can’t see it well from this angle.

“One body,” Grugg dictated to the ratman. “Very dead. Nightshade likely, investigating if it Don Kean.” He leant over with hands on knees to take a good look at the desk.

“Assistant Claudia,” he offered, his confidence wavering at the title offered to the clothesmaker. “Got sacks for evidence?”

“I do, Detective,” she smiled warmly, seemingly moving past her discomfort at being in the Dungeon as she retrieved some wax-lined pouches from her side bag.

“Dead body desk has many messy objects. Grugg recognise Message Stones - more than one hand-of-fingers...”

“I count eight, Detective,” Claudia confirmed.

“Eight Message Stones, Deputy.” The cyclops looked over at the ratman to check he was taking notes. To his credit, Gregor was furiously scribbling into the notepad in a way that Grugg hoped was not just odd drawings for a change - as much as they amused him.

Claudia passed one of the pouches to the cyclops to hold while she retrieved the magical objects delicately with her gloved hand. Placing each of them into the sack, she then sealed it with the top flap and put it back into her side bag.

‘There are some other objects on the desk that are of arcane nature. Visually I can see four scrying orbs; however, if you could place your hand on the desk, Detective, I will investigate further.’

Grugg grunted in acknowledgement, placing his open palm on the wooden side of the desk rather than the top. The wood was oddly dry feeling beneath his hand as though any lacquer and moisture had long been scoured or dried away. The familiar tingling feeling warmed his arm this time as the wizard scouted for interesting objects.

‘Five Scrying Orbs, an Alarm stone, and a used restorative scroll remain on the desk. There is also a drawer that is sealed by magic on the other side of the desk; I cannot determine the contents.’

“Claudia,” Grugg began before the clothesmaker had already passed him another sack for the arcane evidence.

“I was thinking, ser Detective,” Gregor began, as he noted down the items discovered from the wizard’s search, “Ser Demon said that we were not actually employed by the Town as Detectives... and if this is true, then I think we should start up our own investigative company.” His nose twitched as he twiddled the pencil between clawed fingers, awaiting feedback from the cyclops.

“Hmph.” Grugg knew this conversation would come eventually. The matter-of-face delivery of the information from the Tax Demon had prickled inside his skull. He had trusted the Captain and saw no reason for the half-orc to lie to him. But there was no reason the Demon would know this information or make it up to upset him. Part of him had hoped they could deal with this once they had returned to the surface, in front of the Captain himself if possible. But right now, in this room, as they acted as a team, this was indeed a good moment.

“You do already have a logo and everything,” Claudia smiled, nodding towards the eye-and-four-swords logo imprinted on the ratman’s jacket. “Sure, the name could do with some work, but the branding is on point.’

‘If the Town does not want our help officially, that is their loss. There is clearly more corrupting Helpart than they are capable of handling.’

“Grugg would like to talk to Captain, see what Wanu say. If boring Demon was right, then Grugg agree with Gregor. And with Claudia and Bart. Can make our own group and punch criminals for gold.”

‘I guess then we really will be Private Eyes.’

Gregor groaned and shook his head, this time possibly sketching another stinky hat doodle.

“For now,” Grugg continued, “Find clues so Private Eyes can leave stinky old Dungeon.”

Claudia retrieved the arcane items from the desk, being careful not to disturb anything that she wasn't meant to touch. Unfortunately, there was a lack of room in her bag, so some of the sealed pouches were put into Grugg's backpack instead. "All accounted for, Detective."

"Bart, use Orb," he directed the wizard, taking a few steps away from the desk to allow more of the room to be in his immediate vision.

The white pulse of energy flowed across the debris and clutter, filling his singular eye briefly before fading, leaving the telltale signs of highlighted objects of interest. The draw in the desk was outlined in its entirety - a rectangle shape that still gave no clue as to the contents. In some of the side cupboards, other shapes were illuminated. A handful to the left, a few to the right and high up as well.

'Not necessarily all magical objects, although the shapes of the ones to the bottom left do look like wands, perhaps.'

"Gregor," he began, turning around to the ratman who had remained by the entrance - and stopped before the following words fell out of his mouth at the sight of the wall behind him.

Woah, that's a frightening coincidence... right? Grugg...?

The cyclops was pale, mouth agape as he stared at the wall. Beyond the otherwise plain brickwork and cobwebbed dirt taking up this end of the room was a familiar highlighted shape. A massive, leering skull sat staring directly towards them. It was maybe slightly smaller than the one found under the mountain; it was hard to judge for sure. At least thirty feet in height, it was thankfully residing a good forty or so feet within the wall. And unmoving, that was one of the better parts of the reveal, Grugg felt.

"You okay, ser Grugg? What have you seen?" The concern in the ratman's voice was a testament to how peculiar it was to see the Detective with such fear written upon his face.

"Something telling Grugg that being in Dungeon bad idea."

'Agreed, best we wrap this up as quickly as possible.'

"Detective, there's something here," Claudia called from the beside the desk, "I don't want to read it out loud as it looks like a spell of some sort."

Almost too smart to be an adventurer. Let's see what it is, Grugg.

The cyclops tore his eye away from the looming skull buried beneath the town. The highlights were fading now, so thankfully, he wouldn't have to see it for much longer. Not that it now being invisible was any less frightening. He pushed the thoughts aside as he stepped up next to the clothesmaker and lowered his head so the wizard could see the dusty paperwork in front of the body.

'You were right not to read this out - it's a very old ritual incantation. There is something that doesn't sit right though - there is residual energy still around it despite how long it has been laying here...'

"It does look like the room of a spymaster though, ser Hat," Gregor brushed the dust from a book on one of the decaying countertops. "This says... Helpart log book." Placing his notebook down, he opened the tome as the spine creaked and threatened to split apart. Running a clawed finger across the pages of faded text, his nose twitched as his brow furrowed further, turning his glare into a concerned look of confusion.

"What it say, Deputy?" Grugg put his hands on his hips and stood straight, stretching his spine.

"Seems to be logs - Town Guard activity, notable character movements within the town, and Nightshade plots." The ratman scratched his chin, wiping some grey dust into his fur. "Want to know the odd thing, though? It's all dated two months ago."

Silence filled the room as this piece of information rolled around their collective thoughts. Grugg scrunched his eye closed tight and opened it again to try and mentally reset. Then, glancing down at the body and desk, he tried to picture it back in life. Don Kean sending messages to his subordinates, using the Scrying orbs to spy on people, and diligently recording every action of note that he saw. A dried-up inkwell sat on the desk to the right side, and as he gently brushed some ancient papers out of the way - a similar book to the one Gregor had held.

"Claudia?" he prodded as he opened the front cover.

The clothesmaker leant over to the tome and quickly read the first entry before turning to the next page, flipping to a third. The same pattern of confusion washed over her features as she continued to read.

"These are all dated within the last month - and this is the last entry before the rest is blank." She pointed down at the block of text that had partially faded away as her worried eyes searched the Detective's face for an answer. "It's hard to read."

Place your hand on the page.

Grugg did as such; as Claudia withdrew her finger, his large hand covered the majority of the decrepit ledger.

'Mending'

A sharp warmth shot down the Detective's arm into the page, much quicker than he was used to, as one of the vials of components on the wizard's hat flared up with a brief yellow glow. He could feel the page crinkling and shifting beneath his hand. As he lifted it up, the paper looked as good as the day it was written on, with fresh ink proudly displaying the message inscribed.

Gregor moved over to the desk, notepad back in hand to write as Claudia cleared her throat and began to read the entry.

"Finally, after weeks of searching, I have found the secrets the blasted wizard had hidden. To think he made it such an obstacle, even after his death. Lord X believes that there is another

Great Ancient buried in the mountains and that the yeti, under the command of Frank (of all people), will be able to secure it.

Fools all of them, as with this scripture, I will activate the Ancient I have been guarding with the Dungeon for all these years, and the power will be mine. Taking the other Ancients will be a simple matter after that, and taking over Helpart will be just a matter of time. Perhaps even the rest of Mubet and Lord X themselves will kneel before me.

My mentor would probably say I'm being impatient, but I am not getting any younger."

As the clothesmaker brushed her hair away from panicked, wide eyes, Grugg looked down at the shrivelled corpse in the chair.

"Not wrong," he muttered.