

Chapter 57 - Waste No Time

Grugg grinned and released his friends to the floor. At least, the ones that were not permanently affixed to his head. He reached to pat the wizard's hat, despite knowing that Bart could not feel it. Both the ratman, Gregor, and the clothesmaker, Claudia, looked sufficiently embarrassed and awkward about the impromptu group hug - perhaps for different reasons, but it amused the cyclops all the same.

With the sunshine beaming through the windows of the safehouse and motes of dust dancing amongst the illuminated sections of the old wooden house, it could almost be mistaken for a fresh Spring morning instead of the waning days of Autumn. Grugg saw it as an apt reflection of the group's mood. If you ignore all the fighting, intrigue, and pain they had all been dragged through over the past week, then they had every right to be in good spirits. Outfitted with new adventuring gear, all they needed now was a good meal, and they would be ready to take on any challenge.

Looking over at the noticeboard, Grugg took stock of the enemies that hid in the shadows from him. Whilst he had been a Detective for only a few days, he had a considerable amount of success. In part due to the target-rich environment but also because nobody else wanted to do the job - primarily for self-preservation. Of the five bosses of Nightshade that did their dirty work in Helpart, next on the investigative shortlist was the spymaster Don Kean. Through keen clue following and punching the right people, the Detective found out that the man was hiding out in a Dungeon built beneath the town.

The other four bosses would just have to wait. Frank 'The Shadow' was due for his trial in the next week after having been arrested after some amount of bloodshed. They had an inkling of who Gravestone may be, and Gregor, being his Deputy, was taking the lead on gathering information for a stronger case against the stablemaster Harold Fersnitch. The two remaining bosses - Silverfang and Dogman, they had no leads or information on. No doubt, once a few more minor thugs had been shaken down, breadcrumbs would emerge.

Above these criminals sat Blackjack, the area boss that managed the lower five. Apparently, a shapeshifter who used a set of playing cards as their abilities. The encounter with them had been unexpected and brief, and opened up more questions than it gave answers to. Why had he been shifted as the assistant of Bart's murdered brother, Harlan? What had he been reading in the library that required the disguise? Could he shapeshift into a goat?

Grugg rubbed his singular, electric-blue eye. He would worry about the noticeboard full of Nightshade criminals and their over-boss 'Lord X' another day. The Dungeon was the most pressing matter to attend to - after food, of course.

'As much as it gladdens me to see us all here, are we all fully prepared for what lies ahead?'

They each took a moment to consider the hollow voice of the wizard as he spoke through the hat. Gregor winced away from the sound and fought against the urge to fold his arms. Claudia fiddled with the sheath of The Storm, her dagger-sized sewing needle, as she bit her lip in contemplation. Grugg just beamed - there was nothing more he could possibly want (after breakfast) than to wade into unknown danger together with his found family.

“Of course, ser Hat,” Gregor finally relented. “You have already prevented me a good death; I won’t allow you another.”

“It’s as good a start as any,” Claudia agreed. “Adventurers can’t pick and choose the plights before them - if I can’t reach the first step, then my dreams are doomed to fail from the outset.”

“Criminals won’t punch themselves!” Grugg concluded, nodding his head and the hat alike.

‘Then I suggest we gather our supplies and make haste while the day is young.’

And with murmured agreements, the group set out around the room, stuffing various things into backpacks and affixing bottles or tools to their belts. An excited energy set the room abuzz as they each rushed to be as ready as possible for the day ahead.

“How do we reach the Dungeon?” Claudia asked the room as she practised with her shield, getting used to the weight and heft.

“Patson said-” the cyclops began before being interrupted by his Deputy.

“I know a way,” Gregor stated, trying to arrange something within his inner jacket pocket. “There are two inlets we can easily reach to get into the sewers. The southern one is an easier journey but is where the town’s waste exits. The northern one is cleaner but more hazardous travel.”

“Stinky way!” Grugg beamed, resisting the urge to give Thud some test swings within the house.

‘Perhaps I am biased, as I cannot smell, but the Southern route does sound like the safest plan.’

The clothesmaker shrugged in acceptance, placing the shield back down to go over her backpack contents for the third time. “No sense getting killed before the Dungeon.”

The Four-Sword Private Eye Adventuring Group left the safehouse into the cool air of the late morning. Helpart was brimming with activity due to it being the market day - and various stalls from the shops and private sellers were lined up around the small communal parks and busy streets. All manner of wares, from handmade ornaments and decor to preserved jams and baked goods, clothes and jewellery, and even the occasional weapons and armour stalls.

Ignoring the fact that they were heading into the dangerous underground, Grugg bought a small carved statue of some kind of land animal he had not seen before as a gift for the Captain. It was a quadruped with a long-nostrilled snout, beady black eyes, and a plump, rough body. Stowing it away in a pouch on his belt, he was most surprised at the number of people that recognised him. Many of the townsfolk greeted him with warm smiles, and some even thanked him for what he had achieved.

“You seem to be turning a shade of pink, ser Grugg,” the ratman wistfully grinned, he himself not a huge fan of the amount of attention they were getting.

"It's not every day you become a town hero," Claudia nudged the Deputy out of the way to get beside the cyclops. "You too, Gregor."

Gregor frowned and folded his arms at the gentle manhandling, but the sly grin on his face remained affixed. It had only been a few days since the Detective had first called him friend; if the clothesmaker would make the same claim too... then there must be more wrong with this town than it is in the grips of a criminal organisation.

Bart was mostly silent during their ambling perusal through the market towards the sewer inlet. Only occasionally speaking inside Grugg's head to give a key bit of information or dissuade him from wasting money on every shiny thing that caught his eye. However, the Detective did occasionally feel a warmth or odd energy within his body - that most likely signalled that the wizard was preparing or practising some arcane spells.

A stop or two at some of the various food stalls gave them plenty of choice for breakfast, as well as supplies to take with them if the whole adventuring thing took long enough to infringe on other mealtimes or worse - longer than an entire day. Grugg had worried they might be stuck down below the streets forever, in some arcane prison of neverending rooms and corridors. But he was reassured, by both Gregor and Bart, that something like that would be both too labour-intensive and require too much magical power to upkeep without being glaringly obvious to the wizard.

With full bellies and the buzz of the market receding behind them, they began the walk to the Southwest of the town. A split of the river that ran down from the Walpeak mountain edged through the side of the town before meeting back up again further into the forest. For the most part, it was covered up - either running beneath the streets or under buildings. However, as the group arrived at the area as designated by Gregor, running water could be heard above the murmured din of Helpart surrounding them.

"This is not the only way into the sewers," the ratman explained as they approached the smooth sound of the stream. "But it is the only place that would... fit ser Grugg." He glanced at the Detective out the side of his red eyes.

Grugg walked up to the iron railings that sat between him and their target. Just below the street's surface was a large stonework pipe, around ten feet in diameter, with a raised narrow pathway on either side of the moving water. A padlocked gate curved over a steep staircase that led down to the nearest side of the slick walkway. The cyclops followed the flow of the stream, watching it go into a second, smaller pipe before heading in the direction of the nearby town walls - and presumably off into the main river once more.

"Doesn't look so smelly," he looked back at the Deputy, dizzied as his eye tried to unfocus from the tide of dark water.

"It will smell worse, and look worse, further in, ser Grugg."

There are Purification sigils close by - a lot of the waste gets magically sanitised before the water leaves the town.

“Tide doesn’t look too strong...” Claudia squinted down towards the inlet entrance. “But it looks like be a couple of feet deep in the middle, so it could still pose a threat if we aren’t careful.”

“Grugg always careful,” the cyclops lied, trying to eye up the staircase and determine how best to traverse it with his bad depth perception.

‘I think we have all seen enough of your blood to know that isn’t true.’

The Detective smiled at the sound of the wizard’s hollow voice. Just because he had almost died twice or three times didn’t mean he wasn’t careful. If he had actually died at least once, then that’d be cause for concern. The area was empty, and with the stream running below them, it would drown out the worst of the odd magical tone of Bart’s voice emanating from the hat.

Gregor moved forward and, producing a key from his pocket, began unlocking the grated doorway blocking their descent.

‘Where did you get a key from.’

“From someone who needed it less than we do, ser Hat,” the ratman exhaled with clenched fangs. Then, with a click, the doorway unlocked and opened, with a metallic whine from the hinges as it widened.

Gregor stood to the side and waited for the cyclops to go down first.

“Oh, Grugg has to go?” uncertainty in his voice as the stairway grew steeper and narrower the more he stared at it.

The tail of the Deputy waved back and forth in the air. “I will need to lock it again at the end. But, if you go down first, you can assist the Lady Clothesmaker, as I am sure she would not be able to do the same for you.”

“Is there anything we can do to help?” Claudia peered out down the stairway. Although one side was walled, the other was just open to the section of water before it escaped through the smaller pipe—no handrails or ropes to help the climb down.

“Grugg can do it...” he stammered, then sighed, “It just... undignified.”

“Better to fall on the mountain but still climb higher than to sit at the valley and never know the...”

“Majesty of the view,” he finished the Giant phrase for her with a smile, causing her face to flush.

Grugg took a deep breath and approached the doorway, squeezing in backwards. Thud clipped the top bar of the grated doorway, causing his preliminary step to falter before steadying himself. One footstep after another, he descended backwards, keeping his eye and hands on the steps in front of him. Sweat ran down his face as he reached the bottom, and being glad to stand again, he rested his hand on the rim of the large pipe.

Good job, Grugg.

He extended his hand to help Claudia next as they awkwardly shuffled on the walkway to allow enough space for Gregor to follow. Then, after locking the gate behind them, he descended after the pair with no issue at all on the slick stairs.

The four of them stood at the entrance of the sewer inlet, lighting one of the lanterns to illuminate the dark tunnel ahead.

As one, they entered into the unknown.