

## Chapter 63 - Low Tide

'I suppose I don't have much choice then, secret door it is.'

Gregor marked down the tally for the wizard in his notebook, a clear grin on his face.

Grugg wondered what kind of secrets there could be. Of course, the Dungeon itself was already a secret to most of the town above; perhaps it was just a shortcut past some *awful* rooms. However, it couldn't be much worse than furniture that wanted to eat you and a boring Demon. He muttered a curse to himself; he had only gone and invited fate to show him how wrong he was.

"After you then, ser Grugg."

The cyclops grunted and pushed the door open, a weirdly cool breeze sweeping through him as the air shifted. A long corridor, the brickwork with a soft blue tone, stretched on for about thirty feet before darkening. Now that the space was clear, Grugg could smell it. A foul tepid smell, not unlike the sewer behind them, but different. It reminded him of a nearly dried-out pool he had encountered after leaving his tribe. Standing water, where it had stagnated, and the vegetation surrounding was either dried out or rotting away.

'I've just had a thought.'

Everyone paused as the voice echoed down this new corridor and awaited the follow-up. Grugg shivered as the internal warmth left him again. At least his wounds felt better, if not more itchy.

'Let's say, for example, you were Don Kean, and you knew you had the law crashing down onto you. Would it be smart to send one of your lackeys to give false information and say you were down in a Dungeon? Keeping the nosey Detectives out of the way and possibly killing them?'

Grugg mulled this around in his head. Would Fixion have lied to them? Despite their brief camaraderie over trying to physically best each other, he was still undoubtedly a criminal. What the wizard said did make some sense, though; they were certainly out of the way of the town and anything that could be transpiring above. A spymaster having a Dungeon as an evil lair to keep them safe seemed reasonable; a Dungeon being built just to send off potential threats sounded like less of a good use of resources. Like, how much does it cost to host a Tax Demon?

"Admittedly, a valid point," Gregor conceded, facing away from the group, "However, either way, we are still down here."

"Either we find Don Kean at the end, or we conquer the Dungeon of Helpart, right?" Claudia smiled with feigned confidence.

Grugg nodded and cast his eye down the bleak corridor. "Yeah, keeping punchin' till nothing left. If Nightshade boss not here, Grugg find him and punch twice for wasting Grugg time."

'I concur on all points.'

As the warmth grew back within the cyclops, he began shuffling down the path. The walls felt cold and clammy, and the intensity of the offending smell increased as he neared the threshold. The intrusive thoughts returned as his mind populated vivid images of the potential traps and hazards that could be placed along this narrow space. Spikes, holes, falling rocks, rain, and even a drop-away floor were a possibility. Finally, with clenched teeth, he arrived at the opening, party members in tow behind him.

The lantern's glow filled the otherwise dark room, and it turned out that the Detective was not too far off when he recalled a similar smell. A rectangle-shaped room of wide descending stairs that led from each side to the lowest point in the centre. At some point in time, the room was most likely full of water - as denoted by the various kinds of slime and dirt that had tried from some of the upper steps downwards. At the lowest point, some water remained, if you could even call it that. A slick film of green sludge covered the last assumed couple of steps, surrounding the centrepiece of the sickly area.

Amidst the slime sat a large, decaying corpse—Fish-like, but with six damply scaled legs protruding from each side of the grey, bloated body. The empty eye sockets didn't give a clue as to whether the creature was naturally blind or had lost the ocular orbs in the process of rotting away.

"That is... actually quite sad," the voice of Claudia came from behind both Grugg and her handkerchief.

Grugg could understand why. While he did not hold any of the criminals and monsters in this Dungeon under the town in very high regard, to see such a beast just neglected and left to pass as the water dried up around it... well, that must be a crime unto itself.

'It certainly doesn't fit right with what we are expecting. The Dungeon seems to be something lost to time rather than the active den of a Nightshade boss.'

"Could be a decade, maybe more, depending on how quickly they built," Gregor tapped his foot on the floor. "I am now keener to find whatever is at the end of this miserable place, and preferably then go pay ser Fixion a visit."

*There's a doorway hidden by magic at the opposite end of this chamber. Given how hidden these last two pathways have been, I am under the impression this is the quickest way to what we seek.*

What Grugg sought was fresh air and the sky above his head once more. He wasn't as enamoured with the stories told of daring heroics against evil now that he had a taste of it himself. It had been smelly, dark, and everything just wanted to eat him. In this Dungeon, he was the goat.

He began to shuffle around the edge of the room, keeping to the uppermost step to avoid the monstrous creature below. Grugg knew that if he tempted fate by looking closer, he would only slip on some of the slicker steps and end up amongst the filth. There was almost a tangible pressure with how much he had managed to avoid any recompense from fate thus far... it could only be leading to something monumentally dire!

Almost disappointingly uneventful, their careful rounding of the chamber eventually led them to the place Bart had deemed there to be a doorway. Grugg placed his large hand on the wall, which to him looked the same as the rest of the brickwork along this length of the room. It felt cold and brick-like.

*Okay, so... oh - whatever you do, don't remove your hand.*

Intrusive thoughts made the Detective want to do exactly that, to see what happened. Did the wizard just need to focus, or was there a trap that would explode and kill them all. Removing his hand would be the quickest way to find out. He craned his head back to view his companions. Both of them were looking tired and worn out from the experience so far - even Gregor's usual glare had softened. He had led them down here, and it was partly his responsibility not to blow them up.

*There is an illusion spell to mask the door, an arcane lock, and a trap that can be triggered if an unsuccessful open attempt is made. Anyone able to Detect Magic would have no issue finding the door with how much energy has been put into it. The lock itself isn't particularly complicated either - but then that just makes me feel that it might look that way on purpose to trick the careless into setting off the trap...*

"What's the hold-up, ser Grugg?"

"Door trapped. Might die." He watched as the two shuffled slowly away from him with wide eyes.

'It's nothing quite that dire. I'm just... getting used to the feel of the magic. Unfortunately, my Dispel would only hit the illusion first, which may trigger the trap. So I will have to disable the lock manually.'

"Bart is Defensive Ward expert," Grugg chided the recoiling party members, "Silly door no match for wizard."

*I appreciate the vote of confidence. Attempting now...*

An uncomfortable feeling slid down the inside of Grugg's arm up to his placed hand. It was cold and tingly as if it was buzzing along his nerve endings. It wasn't too unpleasant, but it made him want to wiggle and shake his arm. But, for the sake of the wizard, he held still and simply grimaced.

*There's a similarity to this and how a regular lock works - it's about arranging individual parts into the correct configuration to set the whole to the 'open' state. Except here, we are dealing with an intangible weave of arcane energy. Luckily for us, whoever cast the Arcane Lock on our safehouse also cast this spell. Intriguing.*

Grugg grunted. There was something Patson had said about the safehouse and the Giant Rat problem in the past. If he connected some dots, it would seem like whichever wizard did the work for the Town Guard also set up some of the magic down in this Dungeon. They may have connections to Nightshade or at least some answers on why this place had become abandoned. This potential Clue made the Detective smile to himself as he stared at his hand against the wall.

*Not as accessible as the one at home, naturally, but the key signatures are there that tie them to the same person. The good news is I have disabled the trap, so you don't have to worry about being filled with lightning.*

"Ooh, was lightning trap," the cyclops cooed. "Grugg never taken lightning damage before."

"Perhaps that is a good thing," Claudia shrugged as she fiddled with her red glove. "I'm not sure the bandages would do much good for that."

"I agree, and we don't want to waste our few potions," Gregor added, now folding his arms as his red-eyed glare returned. "Ser Grugg needs to take things a bit more seriously. If we can't heal you, then we'd have to abandon you down here."

"No, we wouldn't abandon him-" Claudia frowned.

"Just carry me?" The cyclops shrugged, not understanding the issue.

"No chance. I could maybe drop breakfast down into the sewers for you, but you'd just have to live down here with ser Hat."

'The door is unlocked.'

They all turned away from their bickering to see the place where Grugg held his hand slowly shimmer away to become a doorway. A similar dark wood to the ones previously encountered throughout the Dungeon, but this one was heavier set and had slightly more detail. The Detective ran his fingers around the indented pattern of grooves that made the shade of a flower.

'Nightshade.'

The wizard needn't have said it out loud as they were all thinking it. To have it echo within their chamber did nothing but hammer down on the weight of the situation. Grugg removed his hand and flexed the tingles away from his fingertips. He was primarily surprised that he was unable to feel the grooves and wooden texture of the door; perhaps it was his mistake to assume the illusion was purely visual. The Detective turned to the others with a wide grin stretching across his round face.

"Who turn to choose room?"

"I think we are probably past that now, Grugg," Claudia pat him on the arm as she sidled closer to the door to inspect the detailed logo. Gregor shrugged in resignation.

'Very well, after you then, Detective.'

Grugg turned and stretched his arms out, flexed his head to limber up his neck muscles, and took a deep breath. He briefly regretted that last part due to the lingering stagnant air he had only become partially used to. Grabbing the door, he opened it wide, the stale air that rushed out somehow fresher than where they were standing.

A smaller chamber that looked like a cluttered study at first glance. Cobwebs and dust filled a multitude of shelves and cupboards, the wooden furniture a muted greyish-brown tone. Various objects filled every surface - glass jars, small wooden cases, and many unknown things in the detritus covering them.

At the end of the room, a wide wooden desk took up almost the whole width of the room, itself also covered with decaying clutter.

And sitting in the chair at the desk was a desiccated corpse, wearing a Nightshade flower brooch.