

## Chapter 89 - Day Thinking

“Seriously? I can’t leave you two alone for one hour twenty-three minutes?” Gregor sighed and placed a sack on the floor as Barry closed behind him.

Grugg shrugged sheepishly as he sat with his hand on the dummy, Claudia kneeling beside them to sew part of the padding with furrowed brow.

‘In fairness, he did ask for it. Also, that’s a very specific-’

“Got a watch,” Gregor grinned, showing his wrist, on which a dull silver timepiece was strapped. “One for Lady Claudia too.”

“Aw,” Grugg raised his bottom lip.

“They wouldn’t fit your wrist, ser Grugg. Plus, can you even read them?”

“They have words?” On second thoughts, perhaps better that he didn’t have a watch. His only way of judging the time usually was the position of the sun - which was more difficult in the winter. Time to get up, time to be hungry, and time to sleep. The tribe had a more structured schedule, but on his lonesome, things like that had been left behind.

“Well, I also got some food and scrolls from Lady Shopkeep. She is nice, so I paid for them.”

‘I appreciate that. I will have a look at them later.’

“I’ll go get the food warmed up. Anyone else for another coffee too?” Gregor removed a handful of rolled scrolls before hoisting up the sack.

“Yes, please.” Claudia stuck the needle into the boar pin cushion and took the watch and spell scrolls from the ratman as he went to the kitchen. “Is it that time already? It’s been hard to tell, but I suppose it’s been an eventful day.”

“No criminals and no danger,” Grugg nodded, pretty pleased that he hadn’t spent most of the day bleeding out in pain somewhere.

“Other than finding a living punching bag that apparently my mother had a hand in making, and then promptly breaking it.”

“And stairs, too,” the cyclops added helpfully. “But got medals.”

Claudia smiled and put the scrolls down in a neat pile, picking up her needle to focus back on the dummy. “How’s it looking, Bart?”

‘Lots of interesting things for me to learn here. I’ve also increased the strength of some of his defensive magic. I should be ready to bring him back once you are done.’

“Just this last seam, then.” She carefully worked through the odd fabric, a furrowed brow of concentration on her face. “Now that I am looking at it more closely - it does seem like my

mother's work. Not that she had a special stitch or anything, just the professionalism of it would be at her level. Sorry, I'm rambling."

Grugg nodded but felt otherwise useless, so he stared at the noticeboard. It wasn't as though there would be any clues or connections that could suddenly jump out at him. But, he busied himself with the facts, trying to recall all the things that Bart and the group had been mentioning.

Harlan used to be an adventurer with Claudia's father, Clive. Nightshade had murdered Harlan, and Clive was possibly missing. The bosses in this area had been trying to dig up giant magical skulls for some purpose, and the information was in a very heavily guarded secret box - which Blackjack now had hold of. Grugg couldn't help but feel that the answers connecting the parts of the puzzle were in that box. Getting ahold of it would be the tricky part.

"Here's your food," Gregor called as he returned to the room, putting the plates on the table. "Small mug of coffee, ser Grugg, as you left your big one in the debris. I'm going upstairs to... meditate."

"Okay," the Cyclops pouted, trying to crane his neck around to see the food. "Will let Gregor know if dummy is back working."

The ratman waved dismissively as he headed through the stairwell door, "Maybe."

'He called you Furbag.'

Gregor paused in place for a few seconds before continuing to the broken stairs, closing the door behind him.

"Let's eat," Claudia suggested. "My sibling here is ready to go, but perhaps we should wait until morning? Is that morally questionable?"

"Not as bad as murder," Grugg shrugged, wincing as the clothesmaker pointed the small needle at him menacingly.

'I don't suppose it would matter to them either way. It would leave us an excuse to get a good early night rather than training until late.'

"Agreed." The Detective stood and propped the figure on one of the chairs, eagerly walking over to the dining table.

"Better than wedding cake, at least," Claudia grinned at the spread.

Potatoes, leeks, turnips, some strips of cooked red meat, and a couple of pies - all steaming hot. Grugg sat down and licked his lips, salivating at the smells of the delicious food.

Claudia paused before sitting. "Actually, there's something I've been wanting to give you. It might be a good time now that it's just us for a bit." She smiled and went over to a side table and grabbed her satchel. She retrieved a book from it, which she held aloft so that the wizard could read the title out.

'Goreblaster versus Goats'

Grugg beamed from ear to ear. Not normally one for books, but this did sound right up his alley.

"I saw it in the dungeon and thought it would be fun if I could read it to you if you wanted?"

"Yes please!" The Cyclops nearly jumped from his chair at the prospect. Instead, he scooped the food from his plate straight into his mouth as quickly as possible, downing it with the small mug of - still scalding - coffee.

"Wow, okay, let's get more comfortable seating then first?"

The pair moved over to the fireplace, and a small amount of stair wood became a fire with the wizard's assistance. As they settled into the more comfortable chairs, Claudia began reading in between mouthfuls of her own dinner.

And the story was silly. Wild, fragrant use of prose and metaphor contrasted with the apparent muscle-bound hero. Grugg laughed until he cried, sat awestruck as the goats reared their ultimate battle, and clapped once Goreblaster and his assistant Percy escaped near death and rose victorious.

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The fire had long been extinguished by the time Grugg opened his eye - it was now morning. He looked over to the other chair, and a brief panic ran through him as Claudia was not there. Perhaps she had gone up to her room?

As he stood, the door of the safehouse swung open.

### **Morning Grugg, and sorry!**

Lady Valoth walked into the room and gave a curt nod to the Detective. "Morning, I hope you are well and not getting into any trouble?"

"Only just woken up," the Cyclops stretched, "still plenty of time." He grinned and searched the room with tired eye, for any clue as to where the clothesmaker may be.

'Claudia is in the basement.'

That's what was missing - the dummy was no longer lying, flopped on one of the chairs. She must have gotten Bart to reanimate the trainer when Grugg was still sleeping.

"The basement? Oh, you finally got it open. What was down there?"

"Come look," the Detective gestured for her to follow, pausing at the doorway. "Just... ignore stairs. Detective secret."

"Okay..."

The two of them went through to the stairwell and began to descend the stone steps to the basement door. From here, they could now hear the sounds of grunting and movement. Grugg slowly pushed the door open so as not to distract the clothesmaker.

Claudia ran across the room at the dummy, The Storm spiralling in the air and circling the animated figure. Each strike was dodged or deflected as the padded grey golem danced out of the way. Just as she got closer, Claudia leapt into the air, the giant needle spinning towards her. She caught it deftly and brought it down like a dagger. Blue light flared from the defensive wards of the dummy as it crossed its arms to block the piercing attack.

“You Are Improving Quickly, Sister.”

“Sister?” Peony asked, causing the pair of combatants to turn and notice her.

“Oh, Peony,” Claudia had her hair tied up and dripped with sweat. “We found a training golem that my mother apparently helped make.”

“That concisely answers probably all of my current questions.” The Investigator moved into the room to give it a better once-over.

“Grugg already broke it once,” he grinned sheepishly and waved to the dummy.

“Hello Meat Man, And, Who Is This Fascinating Creature?”

“I am Lady Peony Valoth, Investigator of Oculi Gladii, and I do not appreciate being called a creature.”

“Indeed, A Flower You Are. Do You Care To Test Yourself Against Me, Or Are You Too Delicate, Flower?”

‘I think he is just built to be annoying; I did not see a way to change that magically.’

Peony clenched and unclenched her jaw, trying to decide if engaging the golem in a fight would be worth being called pet names. “Very well, it has been a while since I have had to use my blade in anger.”

Claudia picked up a towel from the side of the room, wiping her face. “All yours then; I’m about to go hydrate and annoy Gregor into getting some breakfast.”

“Tell Furbag The Only Sustenance He Needs Concern Himself With Is Bettering His Paltry Combat Ability.”

“I will,” Claudia smiled, patting the Cyclops on the arm as she went upstairs.

Lady Valoth removed her glasses, placing them in a small case, and followed with passing her jacket to Grugg. Her black leather armour was sleeveless, exposing her pale, muscled arms. The black leather trousers were surprisingly quiet as she limbered up, finally drawing her thin sword, her eyes glowing red.

"I shan't go all out," she moved into a ready stance with her blade, "it would be a bit costly with the trial tomorrow."

"I Am Sure One Day You Will Fully Bloom, Flower." The trainer moved into a defensive position.

Peony murmured through clenched teeth before sprinting forward, a trail of red light left behind by her ornate blade. Blue light pulsed through the chamber as the flurry of strikes were blocked in succession by the dummy. A red mist began hissing from her hands as the speed of her attacks increased, every swing a blur of red and a flash of blue. The trainer started backstepping away from the unrelenting assault. And then, with a puff of red smoke, the Investigator vanished.

The training dummy lowered its guard in surprise before Peony reappeared behind it, striking it with the pommel of her sword. The dummy stumbled to the floor, rubbing the back of its neck needlessly.

"Beautiful," it exclaimed as the goliath sheathed her sword.

"Whereas you were disappointing. Can you only defend, not attack?" Peony put her glasses back on, muting her eyes back to a grey.

The golem stood up, dusting itself down. "No - I Am A Lover, Not A Fighter."

Lady Valoth glared towards the rather impressed-looking cyclops. "Wizard, can you make this thing fight back?"

'I think by design it is meant to be defensive only so that there's no danger of-'

"I said, can you *make it* fight back?" The authority in her words echoed around the underground chamber.

'Y-yes, I think so.'

She turned back to the dummy, prodding a long finger against its padded chest. "When you can wield a sword, instigator, then we will battle. Then I will best you."

"It Is A Date Then, Flower."

Peony hissed and stomped over to Grugg to retrieve her jacket, the Detective yielding to her advance.

"Upstairs, *now*. We do have actual work to get done here today." Her booted footsteps reverberated up the stone steps back into the house proper.

*Wow, that was... all sorts of scary and impressive.*

"Funny how dummy is defensive," Grugg mused as he wandered towards the door, "but makes people defensive too."

He glanced at the *'I'm Sorry'* scrawled above the door as he left, perhaps understanding it a little more than before.