

Chapter 80 - Dig for Answers

I really should be discouraging this. This is a terrible idea, and, and... I am excited to try out some of my new power. There - I said it. If you're doing this, then I can't stop you, and you'll need my help. Not that I have a choice either way.

Grugg paused at the front door of the safehouse - it was perhaps by manner of miracle that he had slowly made his way, fully geared, this far without clumsily making a racket and waking someone. Bart would know if Gregor was watching through his Magic Eye, and he hadn't heard them stirring either.

Alright, I've told Barry to keep his mouth shut when we leave.

The front door opened slowly, with the Detective carefully ensuring it did not creak. Barry had a wooden scowl on his face but kept silent. With the gentlest of clicks, the door was closed behind them, and the cool air of the night whipped around the pair. Grugg adjusted his shawl, trying to keep as much of himself covered - more for subtlety rather than to ward off the chill.

Shame we only had one spell stack scroll prepared - if you had forewarned me, we could have spent some time getting more in order.

The cyclops shrugged as he made his way South. For one, he wasn't about to risk speaking being so close to the safehouse still. Secondly, this wasn't exactly a well-planned mission. There was a wave of anger burning deep inside him for what the Nightshade had done to Claudia, and now that he knew who was responsible and where they hid... Some of the old Grugg started to show.

Classic Bart and Grugg only adventure, ay? It has been a while since we have had some of that. I will admit my part in desiring some harsh justice too. Although how much of that is due to our bond, I'm not sure.

Grugg paused briefly, now deeming it a safe enough distance from their sleeping friends to let out a whisper into the empty streets. "Bond?"

I'm sure you have noticed some part of our personalities changing since our fateful... partnership began. Rounding off the extremes, shall we say.

The Detective considered this as he continued on towards the gates. While he had always been on the calmer side compared to his brethren, he had noticed his Common vocabulary had increased, and he had taken to living in a town like a cooked duck to his plate. At first, he thought maybe it was the amount of yammering that the wizard did that left some of the words in his subconscious. Perhaps Bart was right, and they were leaking into each other through the bonded hat. The wizard had been a lot more abrasive at the start.

It's nothing to worry about. I don't think so, anyway. There's only a small chance we merge consciousness, and I become your inner voice - and you become a powerful wizard. I'm pretty sure I can use magic to stop that from happening. Mostly sure.

Grugg let the words slide off his head and didn't pay too much heed to the wizard's ramblings. There was a lump in his stomach that roiled around next to his built-up anger, but this one sat heavier. He knew that he might get into trouble for sneaking away and trying to beat up one of the Nightshade bosses alone. Even if nothing bad happened, surely the Captain and Lady Valoth would take a dim view of not doing things by the book. In a way, that's why it had to be tonight - before the ink had set on the contracts and agreements, a last sendoff to the beast that lurked within.

A few spots of light rain had ensured that the streets were clear of any potential witnesses, and while he certainly wished he had his umbrella to hand, he was still thankful for the assistance. Before settling in for the night, he had hesitated to ask for assistance from Gregor - or even take the whole gang down. But he knew that this was his burden. His choice to endanger himself in the unknown.

We are almost at the gate - I do not have any spells to cloak you or to incapacitate people... non-lethally. You'll have to use your charm.

With the Captain now returned to the Guard and another Nightshade boss off the table, the previous lockdown had been relaxed, and the Southern gate looked to be open wide. That was at least one part of the equation dealt with. As the Detective's bare feet trod along the cobbled street, he felt a little free and quite a bit quieter. One Guard had been posted at the gate.

A little concerning, but perhaps they aren't as worried about Nightshade activities in the midst of the twilight with most of the higher-ups taken care of or licking their wounds?

Grugg shrugged and walked over to the lone Guard - an older man he didn't recognise, who appeared to be half asleep. "Evenin'," he nodded as he got near.

"Ey? Oh, Detective. What brings you out so late this way?" He eyed the cyclops warily, but whether that was due to the immense size of the Detective, or the suspicious nighttime activity, was not too apparent.

"Grugg think some clue left at lumber yard."

"Middle of the night is an odd time to go look," the old Guard reasoned, rubbing his eyes. "But, I understand some things can be time sensitive. Just... mind yourself out there, ay?"

The Detective nodded with a grunt and moved through the gate. It was mostly the truth, and it wouldn't do any harm to let one person know which direction they went - just in case things went bad or they couldn't get back by morning. Grugg tried not to think about that; part of him was already trying to talk himself out of the whole endeavour.

Instead of taking the path off to the side towards the lumber yard, the pair continued straight South down the main road. It was certainly different at night. Without the brief illumination of torches of the street lamps and the two moons obscured by the patchy rainclouds, everything was shades of dark greys. It took Grugg a few minutes for his eye to fully adjust, but by then they were far enough from the town that he almost felt like he was home again.

The stone and damp grass beneath his feet, the fresh air breeze unhindered by the smell of civilisation all around him, and even the rustle of the trees around him. It wasn't exactly the same as the mountain, but it was the next best thing. All he needed now was a few goats to fruitlessly chase around, and it would be bliss.

As per the town information booklet I had read before coming here, the mine should be about half a mile off. We may have to use the Moonchaser Orb when we get closer to finding the entrance proper.

If there was one thing that Grugg knew about mines, it was that they were underground - which is a place fast becoming one of his least favourites to be. Although usually built into the side of a mountain, he could equally see one being opened in a low hill or outcropping of rocks amongst the trees.

"Looking for some big hills?"

Most likely, a ground-level entrance makes it easier to set up mine cart rails for transporting things out. I assume anyway; I'll admit it is not one of the subjects I am exceptionally knowledgeable on.

"Grugg's tribe not have mines. Tribe had..." the cyclops paused momentarily, trying to think of the Common word for it. "Quarry?"

Ah, like a giant pit that you could excavate stone from?

"Yah. Big dig pit."

Did you ever do any mining in the pit?

"Just a little," Grugg shrugged. "When Grugg was very small, is good for strength."

Was it just stone, or did you ever find ores or something special?

"One time, Grugg found special metal. Baddon made ring for Grugg, but no longer have." The Detective held out his ringless fingers and gave them a wiggle for good measure. "Baddon is Grugg father," he clarified.

I'm sorry you no longer have it; I suppose it wouldn't fit now.

The cyclops grunted and lowered his hand, looking out again at the passing shaded trees and shrubbery barely lit by the dim night. "Grugg will return one day. Get ring back. Show family Grugg good cyclops."

You're a great many things, friend. I'm sure in time you'll find you don't need to show them anything.

Silence fell over the pair as they continued, taking a route in the surrounding woodlands proper. The Detective found he needed to tread a lot more methodically to ensure he didn't slip into little dips in the earth or trip over errant tree roots. He had gotten too used to

wearing his boots, and after catching his toes on the third rock, he resigned to thinking perhaps they were a good thing after all.

A small clearing was breached - a meagre watering hole beside a modest rock that shaded part of the shallow water. The differences in greys of all the different textures and shapes were interesting to Grugg and reminded him of the monochrome Investigator.

Hop up that boulder there, and see if we can get some bearings over these trees.

The cyclops clambered up the rough surface of the rock, only briefly pausing to ensure it wouldn't tip over from his weight. Once that was confirmed, he stood tall atop the peak of it and could just about see over the tips of the majority of trees. A carpet of pointy peaks with the occasional over-achiever, the dark grey shapes slowly waving in the breeze were almost a mountain range of their own.

They must not be very aged to be this short, perhaps a rotated growing area for the lumber industry. Is that how that works? I need to read more. Oh, but look slightly more to the left. No, the other left.

Squinting his eye, there was definitely a darker shape in that direction, slightly larger than the tree canopy. The light grey reflected from the object suggested one thing - stone. He hopped down from the rock, almost slipping over on a slick area of mud. With renewed focus, he headed in that direction.

We must be getting close now; I will pulse out the Orb. I can increase the range but narrow the things it finds - as we are just looking for the mine entrance, it should be fine.

The bright white light was glaring as it pulsed through the nearby trees and foliage, binding Grugg more than usual. Sure enough, just to the right, a small squarish shape remained highlighted from the magical object. Slowly he stepped as quietly as he could towards the located mines, approaching a suitably thick gathering of shrubbery.

Grugg crouched low in the bushes as hidden as his large form was able. As the highlight from the Orb faded, the entrance to the mines lay before him across a brief clearing—a dark archway with aged planks nailed across the entrance. KEEP OUT painted in white across the front.

Strange, it definitely looks abandoned - no light or easy entry visible from here. You don't think this could be the wrong place?

The Detective bit his lip and narrowed his singular eye. He didn't want this to have been a waste of time. It couldn't have been that the suspect had lied to Gregor and Peony. Between the both of them, they could probably intimidate the-

He paused with bated breath as a noise came from the mines. As one, both planks and the supposed gaps of deep darkness swung open as a doorway, revealing the light within as two figures emerged.

“-and he hasn’t returned yet?”

“Told the idiot not to go off spying without the go-ahead from one of the Alphas.”

“Don’t call them that,” the first figure emerging, a cloaked male humanoid. “It’s cringe.”

“You keep rolling those eyes, and you’ll lose them in the grass,” the second figure now stepped from the light into the night - a female wolverine humanoid, equally cloaked in the dark robes of the Nightshade.

“Like that’s a threat; your squad couldn’t even murder a simple seamstress.”

Grugg didn’t hear the continuation of this conversation as his heartbeat pounded in his ears.

Bare footsteps thudded against damp soil as he took off in a sprint, electric-blue blazing from beneath the wizard’s hat.