

## Chapter 55 - No Knock-Knock Raid

'How did you... never mind that for now, let's talk unconscious man first.'

"Alright," Gregor rolled his eyes. "He looked like he was full of clues, so I brought him here."

'Based on what assumption?'

The ratman just shrugged and turned away from the questioning hat.

Grugg groaned and covered his face with both hands, willing the encroaching dull echo of pain in his skull to fade away. "Both play nice. Give me information."

"Certainly, ser Grugg," Gregor turned back around with a more sheepish look. "I found this man leaving a hidden cellar, using this stone for clear passage." He withdrew a square, flat stone that had a symbol of a small purple flower recessed into the front.

'Nightshade flower'

Peeking through his fingers, the Detective observed the small stone. He was starting to dislike small stones. "Nightshade uses flower icon?"

'It makes sense, even if it is a bit obvious.'

"Doesn't have any eyes or swords either," Gregor shrugged. "Criminals have no taste."

A groan from the detained man drew their attention back to the matter at hand as the figure started to stir and regain consciousness. They all watched with bated breath as the detainee's bleary eyes opened and tried to focus on his new surroundings. A sinister-looking ratman who had just beaten him up alongside a rather imposing and oddly disconcerting one-eyed wizard. Perhaps this was just some kind of fever dream.

"Hello!" The Detective's wracking headache turned his attempt at a smile into more of a pained grimace.

The man paled but managed to nod shakily in acknowledgement of the greeting.

"Grugg is Detective; what your name?"

"Barke"

"Barke..." the cyclops whispered, edging closer to the nervous man, "What crimes you done?"

"None, Sir," he whimpered, shying his bruised face away. "I am nothing but a deliverer of messages."

Gregor also got down next to the cyclops to be at a better eye level with the bedraggled man. "Messages to Nightshade, ser Barke?"

Grugg felt what little patience he had remaining after the long, tiring day started to wear thin. As much as he appreciated the enthusiasm of his Deputy, he was not in much mood to have a long, drawn-out conversation. As the one in charge, he realised he would have to relent to hearing the information first-hand. Rubbing his temples, he stood up and loomed over the others present.

“Tell ya what. Grugg needs to know everything right now, or Grugg will turn everyone in the room into paste.” His singular electric-blue eye was uncharacteristically dull, and his round face devoid of any of his usual humour.

Gregor’s expression faltered as he tried to discern how serious the cyclops was being. His tail wrapped around his leg as he glanced wide-eyed at Barke in the hope that the man would start spilling information and save them both from a pulping.

The restrained man also took the Detective at his word, and after a brief pause for his mouth to catch up to his panicked brain, the explanation requested began to surge forth. “O-okay! I’ve been a message runner for the Nightshade for a f-few months. For one of their... one of their gambling dens. The p-pay is okay for such an easy job; that’s why I took it up. My ma always said I’d never amount to anything, so I wanted to go up in the organisation and-”

Grugg held up his hand to silence the man as he drew Thud from his back. Both the messenger and the Deputy watched the club in silence.

*I know what you are thinking. It isn’t the best idea, but I won’t stop you.*

“Gregor,” the cyclops pointed the thick end of the weapon at the ratman. “Take me there.”

---

“Detective,” Patson nodded as he arrived at the scene with several other town guards. “We came as soon as we got your call.”

Grugg grunted his acknowledgement as his Deputy handed over Barke to be properly manacled and made ready to take to headquarters. The cyclops waited for the ratman to then lead them down an alleyway through the shadows of the early evening and build up houses. Eventually, they arrived at a slanted hatch against one of the buildings where the alley had widened slightly. An otherwise unassuming cellar door barred by a simple lock, the wood tarnished and weather-worn.

*It doesn’t look like it gets used much at first glance, although the stones by the entrance are less dirty than the surroundings.*

“We’ll let you take the lead, Detective. We will be here to back you up.” Patson stood straight and nodded to the cyclops before ordering the other Guard into positions.

Grugg approached the hatch, with Gregor following behind. The ratman had been skulking and evasive since the Detective had stormed from the house, dragging the others along with him. “Gregor, watch back,” he huffed at the Deputy, not looking back.

“Yes, ser Detective.”

Stretching his arms out wide, Grugg then grasped the sides of the wooden hatch, digging his fingers under where he could find purchase. With a grunt, he strained against the hinges, and with a long, pained creak, the hatch flexed before ripping completely off the fittings. Discarding it to the side as if it were nothing but detested paperwork, he glared at the downward stairway now revealed. Squeezing himself onto the narrow steps, the cyclops descended the short flight until it reached a standard wooden doorway—a doorway engraved with a particular purple flower.

The sound of metal footsteps indicated the Guard were getting into position behind him, but he had to glance briefly behind him to notice Gregor was standing ready with whip in hand, his sharp teeth bared in a grimace. Grugg slid his right foot backwards, the steel caps brushing against the stone floor, causing a dull scraping noise as he readied himself for the wizard’s signal. A brief moment where all seemed to hold their breath in anticipation, the silence allowing the slight echo of merriment from within to become audible.

**‘THIS IS THE TOWN GUARD. YOU ARE UNDER ARREST. COMPLY OR FACE JUSTICE’**

Those dwelling in the stairway flinched in confusion at the loud, hollow voice reverberating in the small stone space. Grugg’s heavy boot launched forward at the prompting, shattering the doorway into rough shards of splintering wood. A hapless lookout, presumably sleeping or otherwise distracted, was unlucky enough to catch the brunt of the wooden shrapnel, knocking him from his chair.

A room was revealed before them as the Detective and his entourage stormed into the hidden den. Before them, a table where five men sat playing some form of card game - the card rectangles mixed in with gold coins, drink glasses, and other knick-knacks. Around a corner to the right were a couple of smaller tables where a group of men and women were drinking, or at least had been until the uninvited guests arrived. The smell of smoke and stale alcohol filled the air as the cyclops barrelled through to the closest table.

As the men stood and began drawing blades, they realised too late that they had little time to accomplish whatever last-ditch self-defence they had planned. Grugg reached the closest man with a closed fist, the punch knocking him clear of the table several feet into the back wall, the sword half-drawn instead clattering to the floor. A crack as Gregor’s whip flashed through the air and struck the second man in the forearm, causing him to fumble the attempt to draw a dagger.

The rest of the gamblers put their hands up in resignation. Even if they could fight back against the large Detective, the Guard now also filing into the room would prove too much. Grugg watched with tired eye as Patson moved through the crowd being processed to address one specific criminal. The man in question looked to be in his early thirties and had slicked-back dark hair and an eyepatch in the shape of one of those playing card symbols... the club, Grugg recalled with annoyance, as it didn’t look like a club at all.

“Well, if it isn’t Three Pair,” the Guard shook his head. “You’ve fallen in with the Nightshade lot now, huh?”

Three Pair sheepishly shrugged but said nothing as he was affixed with manacles.

Grugg turned and left, with Gregor falling in behind him quietly.

Well, that went rather well. Now let's go and get the rest we deserve.

Despite only being in the underground den for a short time, the fresh air of the shaded outdoors contrasted heavily with the thick, smoke-filled atmosphere down below. Grugg blinked heavily as the chill breeze whipping between the buildings dried his tired eye. As he started off back home, he stopped with a sigh as he heard Patson call for him.

"Detective! Great work in there, and for finding-"

"Was all Gregor work," the cyclops shrugged towards the Deputy.

"Then, our thanks to you too, Deputy Detective," the Guard grinned awkwardly at the muted ratman, "But, Detective, how did you do that loud call at the start?"

Grugg looked down at the Guard, who looked every bit as tired as he felt. "Magic stone."

"Ah, can do all sorts with those these days. I will have to convince the Captain to get us a few made." Patson looked between the fed-up cyclops and the open hatch as the arrested gamblers began to be led out. "Well, I'll let you go, Detective..."

The Detective had already begun walking away, raising his hand as a measured goodbye.

"... we will sort the paperwork tomorrow," the Guard trailed off before shrugging and turning back to the roundup of criminals.

---

The sun was setting now, and the muted greys of the darkening clouded sky spread darkness unto the town of Helpart. It was the type of gloom you could feel in your bones, the imminent rainfall just pent up and waiting for the most opportune time to douse those foolish enough to linger in the outdoors longer than necessary.

Grugg was just content enough to squeeze through the narrow entryway to the safehouse, the dense darkness at least sheltered from the oncoming precipitation. He rubbed his one eye before pushing off his heavy boots and unslinging Thud to rest against the wall.

### **'Spark'**

A dart of light shot across the room, missing every candle and lantern before hitting the inside of the fireplace at the end of the room. Light flared up as the logs within burst into flame, the flickering amber light giving the rest of the long chamber a soft glow.

With a long sigh, Grugg walked over to the fireplace and sat down on the wooden floor, the warmth radiating onto his tired body. It was not quite as soothing as a warm bath, but now

that he had planted himself on the floor, he found it almost impossible to move. As the dancing sparks of flame reflected in his singular eye, it slowly closed to avoid getting even more dried out and tired than it already felt.

*Perhaps we should have a more leisurely day tomorrow rather than head straight into the dungeon. We have been burning the candle at both ends, and we need to be a bit more careful with the amount of danger we are being exposed to. Just some food for thought though; we can decide tomorrow when the day is fresh, okay?*

There was no response, save for the slow breathing of the cyclops. A brief snore was the final piece of evidence to secure the notion that the Detective had indeed fallen asleep already.

'You still skulking around back there, Gregor?'

"Always, ser Hat," the ratman's voice came from behind. "You can't see me from over here, right?"

'Correct, I can mostly just see where Grugg can... Why?'

"No reason." The Deputy removed something from his coat; the sound of the fabric moving was followed by a heavy metal click in the otherwise silent room.

'Gregor?...'

Rain began beating against the side of the house, the pattering increasing in severity as the dark clouds overhead finally relented.

There was no response from the ratman.