

Chapter 86 - Dressed to Ingress

The trousers dropped to the floor.

"I never knew anyone he ran with," Claudia bit her lip in worry, "not after mother settled down in Helpart anyway, they split with their previous party when he went solo."

"What this mean?" Grugg frowned and tried to look up at the hat simultaneously to address the wizard's revelation.

'Nothing, yet. But it's... too much of a coincidence to be nothing. Life rarely ties threads together for no reason - if you'll pardon the pun.'

"Claudia said Krom disappeared?"

"Yes. I mean, his gifts were always sporadic at best. Small trinkets, minor magical items, or sometimes rare fabric and material. The last one was about six months ago when usually it's a maximum of four months between the deliveries." Claudia sat down on the chair and exhaled.

'If he is linked to my brother and Nightshade... maybe they had something to do with your father too?'

"Grugg will find Krom or what happened to him."

"Seems as though sers Krom and Harlan got themselves involved in something big," Gregor said from the doorway, startling the pair who had not heard him arrive.

"Is possible," Grugg shrugged as he turned to the ratman, "but need evidence before guess."

"Naturally. I'm going to make some coffee."

"This is too distracting," Claudia sighed as she stood from the chair to collect the dropped trousers. "Go put these on, Grugg, so I can make adjustments before we leave."

Grugg took the bundle of clothes with a sad glance at the outfit. He had terrible experiences wearing suits. Hopefully, today wouldn't end up like those. "Doesn't Claudia need to get new outfit?" He whined in resignation as he made his way to the bathroom to change.

"No, I had already decided it was a yellow dress day, so it stays."

The Detective pushed through the narrow doorway into the stairwell, passed the locked basement door and into the washroom. With a big sigh of his own, he started to get dressed.

"Bart thinks Gregor right?"

About Krom and Harlan getting into something that now has gotten them killed? Quite possibly.

The cyclops pulled up the trousers and tucked the shirt in. The cuffs were slightly too long, and the trousers baggier than he would like, but sometimes the extra room was more comfortable. "Bart remember other party members? Might be leads?"

Good thinking, Grugg. Krom was their front-line warrior, with Harlan as a fire mage, of course. Then they had a healer - Isaac Lightwarden, and also a ranger... or maybe a druid? Felicia Ivy, she was nature themed is all I can remember.

"Only four? Not full party," Grugg shook his head as he tried to find the jacket arm holes.

Interesting that you say that. Harlan always had five members in the party - insisted on it from the day he left until he finally retired.

"Not just a coinci- coinc- *is a clue then.*" The cyclops roughly folded his kilt up and left the room, hoping that the trousers wouldn't fall down. He was beginning to think this Mayor person wasn't worth all the effort they were going through. Silly human traditions, he thought. They would be going to Galeden soon anyway, and they would have a different leader they could hopefully avoid for their time there.

We'll keep that to ourselves for now. Claudia would probably like a change of subject.

"Oh, Grugg," the clothesmaker pouted as she watched the Detective come back into the main room through the small doorway. "That is a terrible fit. How much time do we have? Do either of you have watches?"

Gregor shrugged from the dining table, where he lounged with feet up, coffee mug in clawed hands. "No. I might be able to get one, though."

"I don't think we have time for that," she shook her head.

"How do you know?" The ratman took a sip of the hot liquid.

'I can roughly estimate that we have about an hour.'

"How accurate is your ability to estimate," Claudia narrowed her eyes, jaw slightly clenched.

'Er, to the nearest hour?'

Grugg shrunk inside the suit, further exaggerating the appearance that it was too large for him. Maybe they would need to be more organised if they were now officially Detectives. There was bound to be a day when they couldn't just blindly wander into trouble or avoid social norms because they were a bunch of misfits.

Claudia sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Alright, let's just do it anyway and turn up when we do. If they take objection to our tardiness, we can just murder them, right?"

"Classic Claudia," Gregor murmured slightly too loudly.

When they arrived at the Guard headquarters, they were not surprised to find the Captain standing outside awaiting their arrival. Despite always being in his armour, he looked shinier and more presentable today, with the grey sky reflected in his silver armour. Grugg remembered something about the Mayor controlling the Guard's money, so perhaps even the half-orc needed to put on a good show despite his power in the town.

"Detectives," the Captain nodded, "right on time."

I can't tell if he is being sarcastic or not, are we actually late or not?

"Captain," Grugg nodded in return.

"Let me be one of the first to congratulate the three of you on your new official position. With you being wielded by Oculi Gladii, the criminals of Mubet do not stand a chance. It will be a shame to see you move on, but I think you have outgrown the problems in Helpart." The smile across the half-orcs face was stoic and professional, the stern facade in full force, contrasting to the last time they had spent time together.

The Captain gestured to the side with his hand. "Let's walk and talk, shall we? The Town Hall is not too far from here, and I could use some fresh air."

"Okay," Grugg shrugged uncomfortably, slightly put off by the stoic half-orc.

"How are you feeling, Captain? Recovered well?" Claudia moved up to keep pace with the half-orc and Grugg, leaving Gregor to slink behind.

"Yes, thank you, Detective Ollen," he replied curtly.

"That's the first time anyone's called me that, interesting."

"Captain mad at Grugg?" He decided just to break that ice early. Although the cyclops was no stranger to conflict, he couldn't stand not knowing and having to guess if he was in trouble or not.

"Reasonable force," the Captain finally sighed, shaking his head. The telltale signs of the creases around his eyes softened as he looked up at the cyclops. "Mad isn't the right word. It wasn't the right thing to do - but you did it. It is done, and the consequences are one arrested Nightshade boss, and a very busy morgue."

"Grugg is sorry."

"They had a lot more people than we anticipated - would the raid have gone unhindered, then some of those bodies in the morgue would be of my Guard. This does not excuse what you did, but part of me is thankful. The rest is disappointed." Wanu smiled.

"Disappointed Grugg does all the hard work around here," Gregor murmured from the back.

"Official story is some kind of gas leak from whatever they were mining. It was the reason the mines were abandoned in the first place," the Captain continued, ignoring the Deputy.

That seems reasonable.

“The Mayor knows the truth, but you aren’t being summoned to be reprimanded. If that were the case, we’d be coming to you. Obviously, with too few Guard, given your performance in the mines.” Wanu cast a sideways glance at the Detective, who now looked rather dapper in his hastily tailored suit - even with the mismatched wizard hat.

Grugg just gave a pained grin. He was still uncomfortable about the whole ordeal; even the support of his team wasn’t enough to wash away the guilt. At least he knew that if they came up against another Nightshade horde, he had a one-button ticket to eradicating the problem. If the moral question of it turned out to be a burden, a change of career to bounty hunter might make it sit easier with him.

“Here we are then, and best behaviour, please,” he glared between each of them. “This man sets my budget. And he likes me very little as it stands.”

The Town Hall was a large building of wood and bricks, the kind that Grugg had slowly grown tired of. Thankfully the doors were on the bigger side and would be able to accommodate him. A large circular window sat above the door with an etched design of a mountainscape in fine black metal. Six short stone steps rose from the ground level to the wide double-door entrance.

With a mixture of nerves, the team followed the Captain up the steps and through the threshold. The interior was well-lit; even with the gloom outside, candles were affixed to the supporting pillars throughout the hall. The hall itself was a singular long room where a large meeting table dominated most of the space. A podium on a raised platform sat at the end of the room before a wall decorated with plaques of bronze, unreadable from this distance. A couple of doorways led away from the sides of this chamber, but right before them, a petite lady with white hair up in a bun sat at a small desk.

“Morning Gladys,” the half-orc nodded, “here for a meeting with the Mayor.”

“Hope you’re well, Captain,” she replied, squinting at Wanu before looking at a ledge on the desk. “You’re just on time, room B.”

So we are on time then? Was she being sarcastic too? We need to get a timepiece.

The Captain led them to a sided room, an engraved letter B on the main panel of the light wood. He knocked twice and then entered.

“Mayor?”

“Ah, Captain. About time.” A figure turned around away from a window overlooking the streets below. He was, by all accounts, quite a short man. He seemingly tried to counteract this by wearing a tall hat and growing a long beard. If anything, it just turned him into a caricature, exaggerating the features he was trying to hide.

Maybe we are late then, or he just doesn’t like the Captain?

“I have brought Detectives, as requested,” Wanu exhaled slowly, trying to hide a sigh.

"I can see that; no wonder we needed these..." he shook his hand towards the group, "if we just pay you to state the obvious. I mean, look at this guy, big enough, he looks like he wants to gobble me up." A stubby finger levelled at Grugg.

"Grugg would never," the cyclops protested, "never have eaten full human."

True, you didn't even eat me. Wait, what'd you mean by full?

"Listen, let's not waste any time here," the Mayor shook his head and walked over to a desk, "as frankly, you're all weird looking, and you're ruining my standin-and-lookin-miserable time."

The team exchanged glances as the grouchy man struggled with opening one of the desk drawers.

"Blast this f- oh, there it is." The Mayor brought out a small box and placed it on the desk. "Since you've all done a bang-up job of ridding the town of the Nighshade yada yada - Helpart thanks you weirdos with these medals. Here, just take them already."

The Captain retrieved the box and popped it open, five medals shining silver within. "I requested five especially," the Captain narrowed his eyes at the wizard's hat, "you'll have to pass on one of them to Lady Valoth."

"Just give them the box - but you can stay, Captain. We need to talk budget now that the main threat against the town has been neutered."

Wanu deflated, and his eyes glazed over, passing the box over to Claudia. "Get some rest, Detectives. Justicar arrives tomorrow, and then the trial is the day after."

"Thanks, Captain, thanks, tasty Mayor!" Grugg called as they were ushered out of the room, the door closing reluctantly behind them.

"Well, that was... interesting," Claudia tilted her head.

"I liked him," Gregor grinned.

Grugg just grunted; that was probably his second least favourite townsman, right after the eccentric shoe man.

"I tell you what'll cheer you up," the ratman waved his tail, prodding at the Detective.

"Let's go home and open up that basement."