

Chapter 62 - Words and Numbers

Grugg yielded under a flurry of blows from the screaming white sword. Trekk was unbelievably fast, and for every attack that the cyclops was able to block or deflect with Thud, another would slice a thin wound across his arm or chest. Gregor and Claudia supported as much as they could, trying to interrupt attacks or cause the Demon to dodge to give the Grugg some breathing space.

The wound inflicted on the neck of their attacker had fully healed now. Typically a near-fatal blow to anyone else, it did not seem to have slowed his relentless assault any - just stained his shirt with his black blood. It was at least a relief that Trekk had been mainly focusing on fighting the Detective rather than his less hardy friends. At some point, with one of the momentary pauses in combat, he had been able to grab at the scroll on his belt that the wizard had indicated. Or at least he hoped the parchment grasped tightly in his large hand was the right one - they had been slightly splattered with his red blood, which made spotting the right one a gamble in the brief time he had.

I can feel it is the right one, but it will take a little longer without being able to see the arcane inscriptions visually.

Grugg feigned a kick with his steel-capped boot but caught the Demon with a surprise upswing of Thud. There was a crack as Trekk blocked with his unladed arm, his forearm snapping from the impact and flopping in his suit sleeve. Thud jabbed out as a follow-up, but the Demon tucked his wings and rolled across the floor to avoid it, catching Gregor's throwing knives in his chest and back in the process. As he rolled back to his feet, he turned to the ratman to hiss, demonic fangs bared, and The Storm struck into his foot. Not enough force to pin it into the stone floor, but enough of a distraction that the backhand whirl of Thud would have to be fully guarded against.

Trekk braced himself for impact as the bone in his broken arm cracked back into place.

'Holy Weapon'

As the spell scroll disintegrated in the large fist of the cyclops, Thud immediately lit up in a radiant, warm glow. Trekk lowered his guard as his eyes widened, now too late to attempt to dodge out of the way of the approaching weapon. All in all, perhaps there was a good reason why he stuck to the tedious desk job, he thought briefly, before the club connected with him.

A flash of white light accompanied the impact as the Demon was sent flying into the back wall, mortar and dust falling from the cracked stonework behind him. Both his arms now lay limply beside him, the sword clattering to the floor before slowly dissipating. Despite the hissing of steam escaping from his torso, he did not appear to be healing, and as his head rose, the bright yellow glow to his eye had dulled.

Trekk opened his mouth to speak as the stomping boots of the cyclops fast approached, unable to get a word out as the blunt end of Thud connected with his head, crushing it against the wall. The body of the Tax Demon slunk to the floor and began dissolving into mist, leaving only the empty suit behind.

'Oh. What happened to the frenemies thing?'

"Huh?" Grugg sat on the floor, the burning pains of his injuries now flaring up as his adrenaline started to wane. "Too dangerous."

Claudia rushed over and started fussing over the wounds cross-hatched across the bare arms and chest of the cyclops. "I have no idea why you don't wear some proper armour."

"It's to lull the enemy into a false sense of ability, right ser Grugg? If they think they can hurt you, they are less likely to bypass you and cut our heads off." Gregor walked around to pick up his throwing knives, wiping the Demon's blood off on the purple rug.

"Sure." But in truth, Grugg just liked the feel of the open air on his skin.

'Demons can't be killed on this material plane anyway; he is just banished to whatever layer of hell Tax Demons reside until he regains his strength.'

Claudia tutted as she applied salve and bandage to Grugg's wounds. "So we have a near-immortal enemy now that may have a grudge?"

'Seems to be a staple in the life of an Adventurer.'

"I didn't realise there were tax implications and declarations to be made. Takes a bit of the romance out of it." She pondered out loud. "Not that there is much romantic about being stuck beneath the sewers sweating and bleeding everywhere."

Grugg looked down at his hands and avoided her train of thought. The spiked leather gloves now had a few silvery lines across them where they had absorbed a couple of the slices from the assault. Maybe some leather armour could be a convincing sell in the future.

'I will assist with healing Grugg for now. Gregor can pick the next door.'

"Already chosen," the ratman pointed at the Northern door, "Whenever ser Grugg is ready."

The Detective lifted up his club to inspect it, the radiant energy still flowing over it.

It will last an hour, good against demons, devils, and the undead. Or anything allergic to blunt force trauma.

"Is common this time'a year," Grugg murmured to himself with a smile.

Oh, we should save that for the future; it would be a good one-liner. Anyway, I'll heal you as you go - but I will stop if anything terrible is afoot.

"What was that, Grugg?" Claudia leaned down beside him as she wrapped his elbow.

"Grugg said 'Thank you'," he beamed at her, the warmth of the wizard's healing flushing his cheeks, he hoped.

"I just wish I could be more useful," she sighed as she tied a knot in the last bandage. "Plenty of times, I couldn't make the attack for fear of catching you instead. I still need more practice."

"Grugg liked when you stabbed Trekk in neck."

"That would have felled most things," Gregor agreed as he went to listen at his chosen door. "Let's try not to invite more fights than we need to though, eh?"

Grugg stuck his tongue out at the ratman whilst his back was turned, and Claudia stifled a giggle. His Deputy wasn't incorrect though; they could have passed through without the conflict. They had come down into the sewers to help arrest the boss of an organised crime gang, and he had just involved them in a fight with an actual Demon. Moreover, he himself had just beaten an actual Demon. Sure, it had been a Demon of Taxes, whatever those were, but it was still more powerful than Grugg.

He would have to ask the wizard what the other two scrolls were for. The new glowing Thud was really nice, and it was a shame it was temporary. There was something about the Dungeon that felt familiar yet so far from home. In a way, it was enclosed and dingy like his cave, but it was also stifling. The air down here was stale and unmoving, totally unlike the open space of the mountain where he would be buffeted by the elements on the regular. Not having quick and easy access to the open skies was almost enough to feel claustrophobic.

With a grunt, the cyclops stood up and moved over to Gregor by the closed door. Besides Barry, all the other doors they had come across so far had identical designs.

"I'm writing down our route, ser Grugg," the ratman flipped through his notebook as he stepped out of the way of the Detective. "So don't worry about that."

Grugg paused to look at the offered page of proof. A door, a chair, a spout of flame, and a horned face all sketched onto the page. They each had a frowny face, even the flame spout. Most impressive of all were the stink lines coming off of the Trekk drawing. The cyclops nodded but had nothing to add.

He placed his open hand on the door and waited to see if the wizard would give him any warnings. Silence, as the internal warmth continued to flow through him. Gregor and Claudia took up position behind him as he pushed through slowly.

This next room looked like some kind of study. Grugg paused on the threshold as he took in the surroundings, making sure there was nothing lurking in the shadows. Doorways to the East and West, the northern wall covered by two bookshelves laden with dusty tomes. A desk had been placed between them, with a single wooden chair tucked under. Other than a purple rug in the middle of the floor, it was devoid of any other furnishings. The Detective stood for a while longer, slightly frozen by all the possible things that could happen once he stepped into the small room.

"Books," Gregor confirmed, peering from beneath Grugg's arm. "Strange place for a study though, seems suspicious."

“Either the desk or the books could be trapped,” Claudia agreed, trying to get a look from the other side of the cyclops. “But, it’s your room, Gregor, so you can decide.”

Grugg stepped into the room, all tensed up, expecting to be shot by wall darts or have the rug come alive and start to strangle him. Neither of those things came to pass, so he ventured closer to the furniture inside. A solitary piece of paper lay neatly on the otherwise empty desk.

“Look, words!” Grugg gasped in horror as he pointed at the brazen note before him.

Claudia entered in behind him and lifted the paper, brushing the layer of dust off to reveal the words beneath. “Looks like a riddle on which doorway to choose from here.”

“Pass,” Gregor shook his head. “I don’t trust Don Kean to lead us in the right direction. Ser Hat, what can you tell us about these books?”

The warmth within the cyclops faded slightly as he moved over to the bookshelf on the right. He knelt to one knee so that the hat had a better eye line to the rows of tomes.

‘They look to be a series of pulp fiction novels following a character called... *Goreblaster*? I’m not sure this is even a published collection; it seems more like original drafts of a private collection... but there are so many of them.’

Claudia moved to join him and read out some of the book titles. “*Goreblaster and the Undead, Goreblaster fights back, Goreblaster in the verdant hellscape of Elf-hell, Goreblaster in love... and skull-mountain!*” She trailed off as she took in the sheer amount of variety and dedication of the author.

Grugg pulled out one of the bound novels and opened a random page up to the wizard’s hat.

‘Definitely a pulp series. Inconsistent diction, a blasé approach to grammatical norms, and some very... colourful descriptive language.’

“There must be at least...” Claudia walked around the desk to check the other bookcase. “Hells, this one is full of them too. There must be close to a hundred or more.”

The ratman had been standing, arms folded and nose twitching as the others investigated the questionable fiction collection. “Are we going to open the secret passage then?”

As the pair turned to the Deputy, they shrugged confusedly.

Gregor sighed. “You can’t smell that? There’s an odd air coming from behind the bookshelf by you, ser Grugg. Unless the writing is that bad, it has manifested an odour; there is something else there.” He bared his fangs and tapped his foot before dodging the book thrown at him.

“Stop being grumpy,” the cyclops ordered with a grin, “Or is Gregor eager for Bart to have his door turn?” Grugg didn’t wait for a response, instead turning back to the suspect bookcase with a discerning eye. Grabbing either side of the wooden furniture piece, he lifted it with a

grunt and roughly chucked it to the side, sending pulp novels cascading into a pile across the floor.

“Look like bookcase had a *Goreblast* now,” he beamed, putting his hands on his hips to judge the slightly smaller doorway now revealed in the newly empty space.

Claudia returned the book titled *Goreblaster finds the secret exit* to the other bookcase, no longer feeling the need to scour the pages for information.

With a sideward glance at the shelf, she instead took a different book and put it inside her side satchel whilst the other two were distracted by the secret door.