

Chapter 66 - Sword in the Stone

Grugg looked up and the ceiling of his stone cell as he lay on the cold floor. Shackles bound his hands to the wall but at least gave him enough space to relax prone - as there wasn't a bed in here, and he was still exhausted and weak from the curse.

Soundproof, and the floor and walls are fortified with magic - but it's not a magic-nullifying room, thankfully.

The maybe-Detective closed his single eye and sighed, trying to push together all the memories from the last hour lest they escape his brain to rest somewhere else.

He hadn't the strength to fight back, even if he had wanted to. It was mostly just shock at first; he didn't understand it at all. Disturbing the peace, robbery, threats of harm, and murder. Even Patson had looked sheepish when he read out the intended charges as manacles were clamped around his hands, but when he had said that the order had come from the Captain... that was when Grugg lost all spirit.

Claudia had been taken in too, on lesser charges or for questioning. After that, things were a bit of a blur, and he could do nothing but hope that she was doing alright currently. Gregor had escaped, naturally. Even before the Guard had finished the first sentence, the ratman had been off back into the sewer tunnels with two less-than-surefooted pursuers. Grugg hoped he had been able to get away safely. And then they were led to the Guard headquarters and put in this cell.

His melancholy mood did little to help gauge the amount of time that had passed. The cell was windowless, but by the time they had walked through town, the sun had started to set. The reaction of any townsfolk they passed had mostly been of surprise, but Grugg had been astute enough to pick out the occasional I-told-you-so nod between some dissenters.

The wizard had stayed mostly quiet and contemplative. There had been a warmth that occasionally passed around the torso of the cyclops, but it was different than the usual Healing Ward - it felt twisted and waning. Not only that, but he didn't feel any better than when they had left the Dungeon. Mixed in with the sadness of having both his food and Thud taken away from him, he was about ready to just fall asleep forever in this featureless grey prison.

Then, a screech as metal moved over metal caused Grugg to open his eye and lift his head as the thick bracing bar slid out of the way of the solid iron door keeping him enclosed. As it swung open with a slow squeal, the Detective was mildly surprised to see a small wooden chair enter the room. He was slightly less surprised when he could see that it was being carried by someone. And lastly, a brief amount of surprise mixed with a dose of angered resignation as he saw that this someone was Captain Wanu.

The cyclops awkwardly righted himself into a sitting position, flexing against the chains that tethered him to the wall, as the half-orc placed the chair on the floor and took a seat. The Captain removed his helmet, placed it beside his position to the right, and withdrew a folder of paperwork from under his arm to rest on his lap. A dry smile formed across his face as he sighed.

“Grugg. What unfortunate circumstances we meet in once more.”

“Why Captain do this?” The cyclops looked down at the floor, unsure whether to feel anger or hurt.

“Simply put,” the half-orc began, drumming his fingers on the folder, “You were a useful idiot. Certainly, you helped the town get results, but you are starting to rile up the masses in ways you do not understand.”

Grugg shrugged; he supposed the Captain was right in that regard - he didn't understand much right now.

Stay vigilant, friend; you have achieved many great things.

“You carry the Moonchaser Orb. Did you ever read into the story of what happened to the elf who so simple-mindedly tried to achieve his goal? Atop the tallest mountain he could see, he started building to get higher, and then one day, he fell.”

“This is Grugg fall?” The Detective looked up at the Captain with a miserable blue eye.

“It was only a matter of time; we couldn't very well have someone like you wandering around causing issues forever.” Wanu was now devoid of any smile; only his creased eyes and stern stare remained, the weight of the words crushing the spirit of the cyclops.

Despite the silence in his head, Grugg could feel the wizard seething, but he himself was tongue-tied. Physically and emotionally, he had no fingers worth of mana left. Getting this verbal lashing from the Captain just made him nauseous - maybe everyone had been right. He wouldn't be able to show his family anything; he had only become a mockery and a criminal in attempting to go off on his own and integrate into human society.

“Your fate will be decided at trial tomorrow. However, I am not cruel; if you admit to the charges levied at you in court, I will have the charges against your friends dropped. Nothing but a slap on the wrist... I'm sure you don't want any worse for them?” There was a coldness to the half-orc's stare as he made the half-veiled threats.

Don't worry; there will be some way out of this - they can't keep you chained up forever.

Even if Grugg would power his way out of the situation, he wasn't sure if he even would at this point. To what end? To be the criminal on the run, escaped and chased away from the town to live in the outskirts of society again. Only he wouldn't be able to return to his mountain; they'd find him there. Of course, there was a chance he could just move further south, live in the woods or find a small village where he wouldn't be recognised... but who was he fooling? Perhaps it was just time to head back to his tribe.

Before Grugg could weasel a response from his dry mouth, there was a knock at the door.

With a creak, it cracked open slightly, and the voice of Patson called through.

“Captain? There is someone here who wants to interview the Detec- the prisoner.”

“Turn them away,” Wana grunted through a clenched jaw, “He isn’t to receive any further visitors.”

“Uh, apologies Sir, but they have a royal writ.”

The Captain swore under his breath, the frustration evident in his eyes. The half-orc grabbed up his helmet from the floor and leant closer to Grugg. “Not a word of anything I have said.” With that, he stood and turned to leave the room, pausing at the doorway to eye the visitor up before he continued into the darkness. “You have ten minutes,” he called out, impatience still ringing in his tone.

Grugg watched the new figure walk into the room, tall black boots leading up to a layered dress and jacket, a pale face behind spectacles.

“Bit late with Grugg breakfast,” the cyclops grinned briefly before the weight of the situation sank into his mood once more.

With a sigh, Lady Valoth sat down on the wooden chair, removing her wide-brimmed black hat as the door to the cell locked with a metallic shunt. Despite her otherwise monochrome visage, slight splotches of pinkish hue were blotted around her eyes and cheeks.

“I’d like to think they had arrested you for your terrible jokes,” she smiled sadly.

“Lady okay? What happened?”

“Seems I got here in good time; I had figured you wouldn’t know. Raulo is dead.”

What? Her investigative partner? How?

“Grugg is sorry to hear. How Raulo die?” Further emotional weight to grind down on his spirit. Although he hadn’t known the man long, he seemed nice enough.

Lady Valoth shook her head, fresh tears silently falling into her lap. “They are saying you did it.”

What??

“What?” Grugg furrowed his brow - this was making less and less sense.

“He was investigating some leads, and he was found crushed to death in your safehouse. But I know you haven’t been in there since this morning.”

How is that possible? Who or what could have killed him in our own house - and what was he investigating in there?

Grugg’s head was spinning, the wizard’s questions adding speed to the disorientating motion. “But why Grugg blamed?”

Peony Valoth shrugged. “It is an odd decision by the Captain, but you are being made a scapegoat.”

The Detective grinned, and part of the weight sank away from him as he imagined what a scapegoat would look like. The Investigator continued whilst he mentally distracted himself.

"I don't know why. I think you were getting too close to the big players. In digging up all the bugs in the dirt, you've come across a snake. Same for Raulo." She removed her glasses to wipe her eyes, which reflected a strange red light.

That's an odd eye colour, it almost looks like she is a-

"Lady a vampire?" the brief excavation from his wallowing pit gave him a stick to poke at things curiously again.

"Huh? Oh, not exactly. That is a story for another day." She replaced her glasses which hid the red irises, turning them a deep grey. "It was lucky I was even allowed in here; I have a royal writ to investigate the Nightshade here - they'll kick me out once they realise it doesn't hold much water for talking with you."

It would be nice to find out more about her Royal approval and how it relates to my brother.

Grugg nodded. He could do with some water too. "What going to happen to Grugg? Executed?"

That's a huge leap; I don't think they're that-

"Maybe. Or just leave you in the cell to rot. Nightshade are getting really antsy," Lady Valoth crossed a leg over the other and leant her elbow down, palm on her chin. "That's what Raulo was looking into, he thought that they were beginning to panic with how you are shaking things up, and Lord X was going to be coming here."

"To beat some sense into stupid bosses," the Detective agreed. It would be what he would do - which must mean that Lord X is pretty powerful to ride into danger without a second thought.

"Perhaps, and if that is the case, then we will need your help. So, I am going to see what I can do about getting you out of here." The Investigator looked to the side, away from the cyclops, as if it was a fate she originally would have preferred.

Grugg grinned widely, his old self flowing back through his limbs, almost tangibly. "Lady Valoth," he began, puffing out his chest as he sat on the cold stone floor of the cell, "Joining Grugg team now?"

A brief laugh came from the monochrome Lady before being cut short by a banging on the door.

"Time's up!"

She stood and leant over to the cyclops to pat him on the shoulder. "You're an ass, Detective Grugg, but sure - I'm in, for now."

Part of me did not see that coming, but it also seemed inevitable.

The stoic expression of the Investigator quickly returned as the door opened, the Captain walking back in. His eyes were nothing but squints beneath his furrowed brow as if he was trying to determine what was said based on the long-gone vibrations in the air.

“Thank you, Captain; I appreciate your discretion in allowing me this leniency.” Lady Valoth left past the half-orc and a bewildered Patson, without even a glance back at Grugg.

The Captain huffed in response and almost slammed the door back on the Guard, who was still distracted by the leaving Investigator. Instead, he strode up to the Detective and looked him close in the face, seething rage painted across his face.

“You better not have been given any smart ideas, cyclops,” he spat, before returning to the chair. “You wouldn’t want to end up like her partner, huh? So now you’re going to tell me everything you two discussed.” Wanu began tapping his foot on the floor as he leant forward on his knees, eager to hear the details of what just transpired.

Something isn’t right here, Grugg.

Grugg grunted and stared back at the half-orc. “How many animal statue Captain have?”

“Somewhere between not enough and too many,” Wanu growled back, “Stop stalling and answer me.”

The single electric-blue eye of Grugg blazed as a wide grin filled his face, the tethered chains behind growing taut.

“That not a number, Blackjack.”