

Chapter 60 - Dining Furniture

Grugg looked down at the table. Where a flat, dust-laden surface had just been, instead, a wide maw was opening. Full of sharp teeth and an elongated tongue that had begun to slurp out towards him. This was rather unusual for furniture.

'Mimic!'

The cyclops stuck his tongue out with bared teeth at the emerging monster; it still stuck to his hand.

Gregor seemed to be having an equally terrible time of it too, as he sat stuck to a chair that was also widening to show off a mouth full of jagged fangs eager to make a meal of the ratman.

Behind the Detective, the sound of hungry, gnashing mouths indicated that it was medium likely the rest of the chairs were also making the transformation. The closest one leapt out at Grugg, intending to bite onto his arm - stopping suddenly with a gruff squeal due to The Storm zipping across the room and embedding into the upholstered backing. Claudia's glove hand was shaking, and using her left hand to try and steady the controlling arm; she withdrew the large needle from the monster.

Grugg huffed; if the stupid table was not going to let go of his hand then he would have to compromise. Using his strength, he lifted the creature up by the attached hand and turned, swinging his arm in an arc with the weighted momentum to crash the table down on one of the chairs behind him. His hand became unstuck as the collision caused both monsters damage, and they hissed and rolled away from each other as the cyclops drew Thud once more.

The chair assailing Gregor screeched as his silver dagger plunged through the cushion into the base, pinning the slanting mouth closed and trapping the tongue as it continued to lap around for a taste of the Deputy. But still, he remained stuck fast. A second chair made for a lunge towards him to take advantage of the situation but tipped and stumbled as The Storm pierced through the now flexible chair leg.

'Cone of Slow'

The pair of furniture in front of Grugg made to scatter either side of him as he wound up an attack from Thud, but the spell cast by the wizard caught them off guard, and instead, they only flexed slowly in their intended direction. The chair took the main brunt of the wide swing, an unnatural dull crack as the weird half flesh half solid form buckled and sprayed internal fluids to the wall in slow motion. The table caught the follow-through, knocking it across the room and cracking one of the flailing legs in half.

As Gregor twisted the dagger inside the chair, it released the adhesive grasp, with the ratman wasting no time in hopping out of his seated position directly into a roll across the floor towards Claudia, stopping in a crouched position as he flung his three throwing knives out towards his attacker. Two of them struck, causing further wounds where they struck, with the third sailed off harmlessly into the back wall. The chair became sluggish as it tried to

chase after Gregor, collapsing after a couple of wobbly steps as it bled out strange liquid from the attacks.

The remaining untouched chair bit out at Grugg as he readied another attack at the weakened table monster.

Kick out to your right.

With a quick turn, he aborted the intended swing and instead lashed out with his foot at the wizard's instruction. His foot landed in the expectant monster's maw as the rows of sharp teeth scraped against the steel cap of the boot. Leaning forward, he tipped the chair over with a push of his stocky leg and continued to put weight on the now pinned chair. A sickening crunch and snap echoed out in the room as the open-mouthed seat section buckled and collapsed beneath him.

Behind the cyclops, a thunk sounded out, as he turned to see the clothesmaker's magic needle embedded halfway through the approaching table. The monster fell limply to the floor, The Storm seemingly having punctured whatever was considered an important organ inside the unnatural shapeshifting creatures. Grugg turned back to see Gregor finish off the crippled chair with his dagger; with one last pained whine, the room fell into silence, save for the heavy breathing of the party.

"Now have to sit on floor to eat lunch."

There was something about eating their food amongst the weird inert corpses of the furniture monsters that put a dampener on conversation. A bit of dried meat, preserved fruit, and cool water and their spirits started to return. What little colour Claudia usually had in her face returned, and Gregor had settled into a decent enough glare that he felt it was time to retrieve his throwing daggers.

'For a first fight, that didn't go too terribly.'

"No injuries," Claudia agreed, somewhat abashedly. "Save for our nerves."

'You did exceptionally well, Claudia. Your support really saved us some headache there.'

Grugg nodded along as the clothesmaker smiled, looking down at her water and not wanting to argue against the compliment, even if she was still a little unsure of herself.

"Gregor was good at stabbing too," the Detective grinned at his Deputy, who was wiping off the monster blood from his daggers.

"Yes, well. Let's not celebrate too soon, ser Grugg. I am sure there will be worse further ahead."

Grugg kept the grin on his face despite the ratman's attempt to keep them grounded. He glanced over between the two doors on either side of the room. There was a chance that even deadlier traps or more proficient creatures could be behind either of them. Or both of them. In fact, he could imagine that most of the rooms in the Dungeon should be as packed full of the most amount of potential death and disorder as possible. It's what he would do, after all. The question was, which direction to take first?

Claudia followed his gaze between the door exits. "Any suggestions on which way we should go?"

'I know in mazes they say to stick to the left walls; however, for a Dungeon, who knows how it is set up.'

"Grugg thinks group should take turns deciding. That way is fair."

Gregor sighed and withdrew his notepad, and in flipping to a page seemingly already prepared, he showed it to the group. Four small sketches lined the left margin of the paper. A round smiling face with one eye, a small rat body with a pointy head and a lined tail, an oval face with a triangle nose and excessively curly hair, and finally, a triangle with an X inside the lower half.

"Which one Grugg," the Detective asked, scratching his head.

Figures that I would be last.

"We can keep a tally," the ratman ignored the cyclops as he withdrew his notepad from inspection. "Although I suggest ser Grugg is the first one to breach new doorways, as he is the most hardy of us all."

Grugg nodded in agreement - at least this way, he could get into the fights first or even any treasure that they would come across. However, he doubted that the Nightshade spymaster would have peppered his underground lair with shiny trinkets and cooked meat to be stolen away.

'That makes the most sense. We are probably the best equipped to deal with any physical or magical threat we stumble into.'

The Deputy scowled and turned away to pack away his lunch belongings before they moved on.

"In my professional opinion, green doesn't suit you," Claudia grinned slyly at the glare returned by the ratman as she stood and approached the door on the West. "Ladies first, right?"

The clothesmaker put her hand gently on the door and closed her eyes for a handful of heartbeats before turning around and doing the same on the opposite side of the room for the East door. Taking a moment to mull the decision in her head, eventually, she turned to Grugg and pointed to the Easterly entrance. "The other one feels more dangerous," she shrugged.

Right, so we need to decide on a standard operating procedure for danger checks and-

The Detective launched across at the door, planting his heavy boot dead centre in a kick that had the full weight of his massive form behind it. The unassuming door cracked straight off the hinges and clattered into the room beyond - and almost instantly, the bright light of two large jets of flame coursed over the wooden form, slightly blinding the cyclops.

As the heated air washed into the mimic room, the jets of fire subsided, leaving a charred and slightly alight door remaining on the floor. The crackle and splintering sound of the fibres splitting under the intense heat was in contrast to the party's silence as they stared through the wide opening.

"You reckon they are the type to reset?" Claudia tried eying up the room beyond to see if any obvious traps could be made out.

'Depends on if they are mechanical or magical, and then entirely on what magic. Grugg, put your hand on the floor for me.'

The Detective knelt and placed his open palm on the warm stone floor just inside the fire trap room. A somewhat familiar tingling feeling ran down his arm from his core and itched at his hand as it rested amongst the dust. The burning wood smell reached his nose now, and it reminded him of last winter in the mountains. He had found an abandoned wagon in the lower reaches of his home and broken it down over the coldest months to use as firewood. It had a weird smell due to how the timber had been treated, but it did the job mostly fine. If anything, it now just made him homesick.

'Harlan would be aghast at how terrible this work is. Whoever cast these sigils should be... anyway, there is an activation pressure plate near the middle of the room. It is linked to two Fire Spray spell sigils on the walls, and whilst they are powerful, they also have a long cooldown period. I could dispel the sigils, but I'd have to be touching them.'

"How long exactly is the cooldown?" Gregor menaced from behind, tapping his foot.

'From what I am able to detect in this form, more than one minute, less than one hour.'

"So Grugg should run now?" The Detective shifted into a position he could quickly sprint from.

"No, Grugg!" Claudia groaned, placing her hand on his side. "Wait a little longer and then throw one of these monster corpses in there; then you can go in as soon as it is set off."

Slow and steady is going to be the best way we get through this, unfortunately.

As Gregor marked off a tally for the little picture representing Claudia, Grugg went to the pile of dead mimics that they had tried to shuffle away into the corner and lifted out one of the chairs. Despite still looking mostly like a solid piece of furniture, albeit with a wide toothy maw, the body was soft and meaty - and not in an appetising way.

Back at the doorway, he grunted as he chucked the corpse halfway across the room unceremoniously, it landing with a dull thud atop the charred remnants of the door. The party tensed in anticipation, but no spurts of flame apparated.

'I did say up to an hour, I suppose.'

"So Grugg has time to go in?"

"If anything, every minute you haven't gone in is a minute closer to it resetting - it could still be anytime?" Claudia shook her head and brushed her red curls from her furrowed brow.

"But, Grugg could just-" the cyclops began before a short click heralded the scorching spray of bright fire dousing the room from both sides once more.

A sickening smell of burnt monster filled the air as, after a few seconds, the flames died out, leaving the blackened mimic body shrivelled in the centre of the room. The Detective wasted no time in rushing into the room unprompted and slamming his open hand onto the wall where the bright sigil still shone with a warm orange glow. For a second, Grugg thought the overheated stone might burn his skin, but the tingling down his arm increased as the hollow voice of the wizard rang out in the humid chamber.

'Dispel Magic'

The glowing sigil immediately faded into grey and flaked from the wall like ash, leaving nothing but the plain wall behind. Grugg ran over to the other side of the room, and the dispel was repeated as the second sigil was rendered inert by Bart.

Claudia and Gregor entered the room, the former with her handkerchief over her face and the second with just a discerning scowl. But, for now, it seemed they were content enough to assume the room was safe enough.

"Grugg's turn now!" he beamed before turning to the single closed door at the East side. "Hmm, tough choice." The cyclops walked over and this time, gently pushed the doorway open, giving the wizard enough time to prewarn him if anything untoward was sensed.

As the room beyond came into view, a well-lit chamber with hanging tapestries adorning the walls sat before the Detective. Another table with a set of five chairs, equally trimmed with purple upholstery, and again seated atop a mottle purple rug. Behind the table, a door continued East, and there was a second similar exit to the North.

Where this room differed, however, was the figure already sitting in one of the chairs. Lifting his horned head, and pushing up the small round spectacles that sat on his dark red skin, the man within gave a humourless smile and gestured to the chairs.

"Please come in; you are late for your taxation meeting."