

Chapter 58 - Something Smells

Traversing this first part of the sewers was proving more difficult than expected. For one, the curvature of the brickwork pipe meant that Grugg had to stoop at an angle, lest he be pushed into the flowing water at the centre. He was not one to complain over some brief discomfort, but every time he relaxed, the metal cap of Thuds base would scrape against the stone, causing him to twitch. All that twitching gave him a cramp between the shoulders that he didn't have space to stretch out.

Gregor seemed to be faring much better, looking more comfortable and relaxed than the Detective had ever seen in him. Occasionally stopping to sniff the air or to wave the lantern over the increasingly fetid water that passed them by, it was assumed by all that the ratman must at least have a vague idea of where they were going. Not that they had much choice at present - any offshoot or encroaching pipework encountered so far were well below the necessary width for any of the party to fit through.

Claudia walked carefully behind the cyclops, trying to allow enough space that she wouldn't get in the way but also be close enough to lend aid if needed. Although, what kind of aid she would be able to offer was unknown - she certainly wouldn't be able to catch Grugg or lift him from the sewage if he fell. She had tied a red handkerchief around her mouth and nose to keep the growing smell away, but it hadn't stopped her eyes from watering as they progressed.

'The Purification sigils will be either weaker or less frequent as we head deeper into the sewers - I assume their goal was to make sure that by reaching the river, the water had become clean.'

The hollow voice of the wizard carried and echoed through the round tunnel to no response. Grugg had no intention of opening his mouth to speak lest he get the taste of muck in his mouth. It would only be inviting disaster. Undoubtedly, if he attempted a witty remark or tried to get smart at the wizard, he would be the first one into the disgusting water. It was almost a matter of time before they all would; he knew how this sort of thing worked. Maybe they should just do it now and get it over with.

Gregor turned to see the Detective staring down at his tail. "There's a bridge slightly further ahead; it should be wide enough for us to have a brief break, ser Grugg."

The cyclops nodded and smiled sheepishly, the thought of throwing the ratman into the water drifting out of his head, just like that body drifting past in the...

As one, the group stopped to watch a half-desiccated corpse float by in the river. Although there were not enough features or clothing to define who or what the body once belonged to, even as it left their vision in the darkness of the tunnel behind, they could see it slowly break down as the Purification sigils did their work.

'Oh hells, I hadn't even considered they could be used for body disposal. Normally one sigil or spell isn't enough - but a sequence of them...'

As the last reverberations of the wizard's voice faded into silence, the party continued with a sombre mood. If there ever was a question of people vanishing, at least they now knew one potential fate of the missing. Thankfully, after a couple of pained minutes, they reached the foretold bridge. It was but a simple brick structure, slightly arced over the sewer stream, but it was indeed wide enough for all of them to fit and take a breather from the trek so far.

Grugg took a swig of his water, being careful to ration it as much as possible. It didn't help that he was twice the size of the other two put together, but they had done their best to laden his pack with enough rations to keep the cyclops going. It was cool and refreshing in contrast to the oddly humid sewer system. He could feel the stench start to cling to him, tainting his sweat like a thin film of grime.

He took a moment to stretch out his taut muscles, extending his arms up and back to loosen out the cramps he had developed. "How much further?" he whined to the ratman sitting on the floor with his eyes closed. If he had to stoop through the whole Dungeon, it would sour the entire experience. Still, no turning back now.

"We are about halfway through the town, still on the West bank of the pipe system. It should only be a few hundred feet before the main junction that heads back towards the town centre, ser Grugg." The Deputy did not open his eyes to respond, instead seemingly in an almost meditative trance.

'How do you know so much about the sewer system?'

"Because ser Hat. One of us has to do the research to ensure we don't all die underground, lost and covered in faecal matter."

"Hah, poop," Grugg grinned at the stoic ratman, waiting for him to open his eyes.

I suppose that is a fair point. Am I supposed to be the prepared one? I feel like my role as the wizard is meant to be the smart one, but I came here just as unprepared as you did.

The grin on the Detective's face waned as Gregor didn't budge and notice his immature comment. Instead, turning to Claudia, he now noticed the woman sitting with her head buried in her knees.

"Claudia okay?"

The reply came back meekly as she raised her head. "Yeah." She was paler than usual and much sweatier. "Just feeling a bit like a fish out of water."

"Fish wouldn't want be in this water," Grugg shook his head, peering over the edge of the bridge at the dark and occasionally lumpy river.

'Some sewer systems have creatures living within, depending on location and climate. Do you know of any here, Gregor?'

"Nothing recently," the ratman finally opened his eyes to glare at the wizard's hat. "In previous years, there was the Giant Rat issue, which you already knew." His gaze cast back

to the dark tunnel ahead of them. "They stop anything getting in from the mountainside, and most of the connecting pipes are too small, or grated, for anything bigger than a... rat."

"Let's go," Grugg commanded, giving a hand to Claudia to help her up. "Less stink, more Dungeon."

Gregor shrugged and led them back onto the narrow pathway to head northward.

It was only a handful of minutes longer, but to the burning muscles in Grugg's upper back, it felt like hours. Finally, they had made it to what constituted the junction the ratman had mentioned. Another tunnel of similar diameter joined their Northerly line and headed directly Eastwards. Much to Grugg's delight, the sewage that flowed down this wide tube had a narrower stream that joined into the main outward flow - meaning the pathways on either side were wider.

At a stretch, the Detective could almost put a foot on each side of the tunnel above the sewage. He bit his tongue to remind himself not to do anything stupid as he looked forlornly at the tempting gap.

"You okay, Grugg?" Claudia's concerned voice came weakly behind him. "You look on edge."

"Want to be," he replied absent-mindedly. "Oh, sometimes Grugg get bad thoughts that he should not do."

'They are called intrusive thoughts - everyone gets them.'

"Maybe Bart is Grugg's intru-sive thoughts."

You could be right. All along, I've just been a figment of your guilty conscience trying to come to terms with the accidental killing of the poor, helpless old man.

"No more!" the cyclops wailed, trying to cover his ears with his hands despite it not preventing the wizard's telepathic voice from speaking to him.

"Could you please keep it down back there," Gregor seethed through clenched fangs.

Grugg glumly clammed up. The lantern held by the ratman lit up the stonework of the nearby tunnel as they passed, and it was a generally boring experience. There was barely any noticeable wear or other markings along the dull brickwork, and in fact, the Detective could barely tell that they were progressing down this new tunnel at all. This could just be some endless loop of darkened, stinky tunnel that will last forever until-

Oh, there it was - an opening ahead. The tunnel widened into a dome shape as the sewage travelled underneath the floor in square sections. Three exits expanded out from this room in the remaining cardinal directions, each as wide and full of foul odour as the one they had just come from.

"This would have been a better place to rest, huh?" Claudia nudged past the Detective as she stretched her arms out in the more expansive open space.

Gregor lashed his tail in the air and glared at the clothesmaker but didn't say anything.

'I suppose we'll want to head either East again or North, to get closer to the centre of town?'

"Grugg misses fresh air," the cyclops huffed as he winced at each of the exits, already disorientated on which way to travel.

The ratman covered his eyes with one hand and clenched his teeth, standing in silence for a moment in an attempt to dull out the complaints of the party. "East," he finally concluded, starting in that direction.

Claudia and Grugg shrugged to each other tiredly and followed on.

They had switched to the left side of the tunnel this time; whatever Gregor seemed to know, he was not intent on sharing. If he felt any ill from the rank, dense air of the sewers, he did not show it. Beyond his usual sour mood, anyway.

Not being able to see the sunlight was playing havoc on Grugg's ability to tell the time. Was it still the early morning, or had they been walking throughout the afternoon? It surely couldn't be evening. Perhaps a week, though? No. It couldn't be that long; otherwise, he'd have eaten the Deputy by then. He again cast his eye over the ratman with the intrusive thoughts guiding potentially terrible choices.

"Here we are," Gregor proclaimed, disappearing into the wall in front of the cyclops with the lantern.

The brief wave of panic as the vanishing light plunged the tunnel into pitch darkness was enough to snap Grugg out of any thoughts of misdeeds. It must be the fumes getting to his head, he considered. He was usually a lot more in control of his thoughts. And then, relief, as the lantern extended back out to illuminate the rough doorway hewn through the side of the tunnel.

Squeezing through the dusty entrance, the Detective held out his hand to help Claudia down the short step into a small room that was barren and unkempt. Against the wall opposite, a door hatch with several metal bars across it sat menacingly locked.

'This is where the Giant Rat Uprising broke through and was eventually sealed once they were repelled.'

"I didn't know you were such an expert, ser Hat," Gregor rolled his eyes as he inspected the metal bars across the hatch.

'No - it says it up the top there.'

The lantern was raised to show the upper brickwork was engraved, stating what the wizard had just read out.

"Let me the bars," Grugg exclaimed, his enthusiasm to be out of the wretched malaise of the sewers warping his Common. Stomping over to the hatch and pushing the ratman out of the way to wrestle with the bars.

With a sharp pang under grunted effort, the first bar sprung out of its setting. The cyclops exhaled deeply before grasping at the second whilst his party stood back. A second pang was shortly followed by a third as the metal bent back out of position.

“See, easy,” the Detective grinned, leaning against the hatch to regain his breath. The hatch returned the favour by collapsing under his weight, sending the cyclops tumbling down into the darkness.

With a series of thuds as Grugg tumbled down a short set of rough stairs into the pitch blackness of whatever lay beneath the sewers, he grunted and started to right himself.

He paused halfway as a nearby voice rang out at him.

Ah, I was beginning to think it would be forever before I received some visitors.