

98 - Keys to the City

The door burst inwards, fragmenting the unlit interior with scraps of aged wood and dust. Even the walls shuddered and groaned from the assault - perhaps Gregor was right about the need for stone buildings.

“Spark.”

They both waited in silence as nothing happened.

Grugg pointed his stubby finger at the darkness. “Spark.”

“Well,” the wizard paused, “it was worth a try, at least.”

“Need a light, Detectives?”

They both turned from the pitch entryway to see Lady Valoth standing behind them. She withdrew a torch from a backpack and lit it, passing it to the wizard.

“Fancy seeing you here,” Bart narrowed his eyes, taking the light source.

“I came by the safehouse to drop off some paperwork and annoyed Gregor into finding you with his Magic Eye.” She smiled, readjusting her pack. “You really need to consider supplies if you’re going to go adventuring.”

“How is Captain?” Grugg winced away from the flickering light as Bart moved past him into the building.

“Recovering. He almost lost his arm, but he will be fine with the extra healing they pulled in. The mood around the headquarters is... well, they are in mourning. Eight Guard, including Patson, and five civilians didn’t make it.”

“Always so bittersweet,” Bart added from within the building, “such victory over Nightshade came at such cost.”

Grugg nodded and let the Investigator in first. The wizard went around and lit the wall torches with his held one, bringing illumination to this first chamber.

A short passageway sloped downwards so that they ended up slightly below ground level and led to a collection of tables - bare and worn. To the right side of this sitting area, some manner of bar or counter stretched along the wall with an opening above - a door at the end leading to the room beyond. To their left, a short staircase downwards stopped by a large square pit in the floor.

Grugg approached and peered down into it. Around fifteen feet deep, the floor was covered in sawdust, dirt, and dust. Grooves and chips had been knocked out of the stone walls of the pit, and the floor was patched with stains and cracks.

“Fighting pit,” he murmured to himself. The cyclops closed his eye and imagined the roar of the crowd, the heat of combat, and the smell of stale ale and sweat. He rubbed a tear from his eye as the wizard joined him.

“The world is full of underground illegal fights, Grugg. Next time we will get them.”

“There are even some above-ground, legal ones,” Peony added from the tabled area, running a gloved finger over the rough wooden planks. “Better chance of a fair fight and stronger opponents.”

“In Galeden?” Grugg asked eagerly but deflated when the Investigator shrugged in response.

“Let’s look out back; that’s where the meat of any evidence would be stuck,” Bart gestured towards the bar door.

“Valid,” Peony agreed. “It is my understanding that the fighting area was mostly a front, so any Nightshade connections would be more out of sight.”

Grugg led the way, pushing through the small doorway into a darkened room with barrels stacked on one side and a pair of tables sitting in the centre of the room. Two doors led out of this room.

“Fifty-fifty,” the wizard grinned, “I bet one is the office where all the secrets would be.”

“And the other one?” Peony crossed her arms.

“Not office,” Grugg confirmed astutely.

“I’m glad I vouched for you to become Detectives,” the goliath rolled her eyes.

“Technically, I am not,” Bart grinned and gestured for the cyclops to try one of the doors.

“I already sent the message out this morning to have that changed. I do my paperwork as soon as possible so it’s out of the way; that way, I can focus on... I guess shepherding around the most violently effective Detectives on the continent?”

“I bet there must be worse than us,” Bart ran his fingers through his beard.

“In terms of casualties for time spent on the job, there are perhaps warlords that would pale at your achievements.”

Grugg pushed open the door on the right side before slowly closing it and turned back to the others. “Bathroom.”

They watched as the cyclops, partly stooping due to the low ceiling, moved over to the other door - peeking inside it before announcing with a smile, “Office!”

“Fifty-fifty,” Bart wagged his eyebrows, much to the Investigator’s chagrin.

The room inside was on the small side. Grugg had become tired of windowless, underground chambers. Hopefully, the Nightshade in Galeden liked to reside in better-lit hideouts. After the three of them filtered into the office, there was not a great deal of space left to swing a Thud. Two tables lined a wall, with a chair and a couple of filing cabinets strewn messily, drawers pulled from the cabinets themselves to lay upon the floor.

“Looks like they cleared the place out, as expected,” Bart tilted his head and put his hand to his chin. “But where haste is employed, errors can soon follow along.”

“A long what?” Grugg put his hand to his chin to copy the wizard.

“Bart is saying that if they left in a hurry, they may have overlooked something. Start digging around.”

The trio turned over every drawer, inspected the brickwork of the room, and even started taking some of the furniture apart. Although, that might just have been how frustrated Grugg was getting. After a few minutes with no results, Bart sighed and tapped Grugg on the arm.

“Hmm?”

“Could you use the orb, please?”

“Oh yeah!” Grugg unslung his club, chipping some stone from the ceiling as the metal tip ground against it. A white light pulsed through the small room; a reflective sheen crossed the large blue eye of the cyclops. He turned and pointed at the wall above the desks, a frown crossing his face. “Something there, but is like... words?”

“Let me try something,” Peony muttered a phrase under her breath, and a red light appeared at her raised fingertip. As she pressed her index finger against the wall, the light snaked away from her finger as if with a life of its own - leaving a trail across parts of the wall that started to form words.

“Impressive,” Bart nodded as the last of the light faded away, leaving a message visible to them all.

*Between petals, poison bloom,
Deadly Nightshade,
Held aloft by many,
None to benefit, when all consume.*

“Terrible prose, really,” Bart shook his head, “not the sort of thing I’d put above my workspace.”

“Hmm,” Grugg narrowed his eye, looking at the small Nightshade logo beneath the stinky poem. “Lady have a map of town?”

“I do, yes.” She removed her folder from her backpack and placed the map on the table, stretching out the fold lines.

They watched as the cyclops took a pencil and slowly drew a group of circles, trying not to ruin the map by pressing too hard. Once each circle had been drawn, he made a line between each of them.

“There,” he presented the result with a grin, wiping the sweat from his head. “All boss bases joined together to show where Blackjack live.”

Peony frowned as she stared at the map. “They don’t cross paths at the same location, nor does it make a shape or other signifier.”

“Oh.” The cyclops frowned at the squiggles, trying to see the pattern he thought would be there.

“Maybe it’s the Great Ancients? Here, let me. Mountain, Dungeon, Mines, Lumberyard... was that all of them? Why do I feel like there should be five?” The wizard tapped the pencil on the map as he drew lines between each of the skull locations too.

“Well.” There was a brief silence as they all took in the additional lines before the Investigator continued. “Looks just like you ruined a perfectly good map.”

“There wouldn’t be one here, no digging...” Bart murmured to himself, thinking aloud, “...perhaps we need to look into any recent excavation activity in the town?”

“A better lead than drawing shapes on my map,” Peony huffed. “Back into town then.”

“I’m just saying, why go through the effort of hiding the bad poem? Why not-”

“Would you both be quiet for a moment.” Peony stopped to pinch the bridge of her nose.

“Sorry, it was easier to converse with Grugg when I could speak directly into his brain.” Bart shrugged apologetically.

They pushed through into the building the Investigator had led them to - some form of record-keeping establishment that didn’t have a funny animal name, so Grugg didn’t care. It had the same wooden structure as most of the official buildings in the area, but the smell of closed-in air and old books reminded the Detective mostly of the library.

A clerk at a desk looked up as they entered, a half-elven woman with tied-back brown hair and a plain grey dress. She smiled and rubbed tired-looking green eyes as she approached the group.

“Morning...? Or afternoon? Apologies, I’ve been stuck in the books all day. How can I be of service?”

“We would like to enquire an excavations or construction work in the town from the last... six months, if you please.” Lady Valoth took out her badge to prove authority for the request.

“Certainly, Investigator, please take a seat while I gather the records.” The woman gestured to an empty table before heading into a back room.

“All of the skulls have been outside this kind of jurisdiction,” Bart began as he sat, “the mountain, mines, dungeon, and lumberyard would have all been done without the town's consent or knowledge.”

“True,” Peony accepted with a shrug, “but you should never count out potential leads because of a trend. Not all crime is organised.”

“All skulls guarded by Nightshade. If yeti had joined,” Grugg corrected himself, “Frank and Gravestone not have one, though.”

“Hmm,” Bart stroked his beard, “not that we know for sure that there are five of these skulls - but if that is the case, then there is a non-zero chance that Blackjack had one wherever he was based.”

The clerk returned with three weighty books, placing them on the table. “There's the Planning Permission requests, Records of Labour, and Resource Acquisition ledgers. Anything else, please let me know.” She smiled and returned to her desk.

“Normally, I am a huge fan of books, but these look rather dry.” Bart sighed and flipped one open, trying to find a relatively close date.

“Let Grugg know if any need punching,” the cyclops narrowed his eye, trying to make out the cover text of the next one.

It turned out that they did not need punching. In fact, Grugg sat there bored for perhaps a century as the pair hummed and ahhed about various minutiae that he couldn't bear to listen to. He was almost considering a nap before Bart startled him with an arm jog.

“Hmm, this one stands out for me for some reason,” the wizard prodded a page, “there's permission to build a basement at Eight Hedgerow - but the labour requested doesn't match what was provided?”

“How so?” Peony shuffled around to get a look at what he had found.

“They were provided almost three times the labourers requested, and all the workers were new to the area. The project is still marked as incomplete - citing groundwater issues.”

“Hedgerow is the fancy part of town; the Mayor lives there, along with around a dozen aristocrats or otherwise wealthy do-nothings,” Peony rolled her eyes, “and before you ask - I saw, and avoided, the Mayor this morning - so he is not Blackjack.”

“But there's a chance that he has been impersonating someone living there and getting Nightshade to dig beneath the area for one of the skulls?”

“Probably the best lead we have, currently,” Peony sighed. “If the key was made around here, we could question the local locksmith, but even the door key has some slight magic to it.”

“It does?” Bart paled, “I couldn’t even tell.”

“Regardless, we should go investigate number Eight and see.”

“Odds on them not answering the door?” The wizard beamed at the cyclops.

“Fifty-fifty,” Grugg beamed right back.