

## Chapter 91 - The Morning Of

Unhappy was not able to feel pain.

The spell that slowed their movements did not make them feel lethargic. Instead, they felt relaxed.

The whip constraining their legs together did not make them feel trapped. Instead, they felt comforted.

The cyclops behind them, pinning their arms to their chest in a tight bear hug, did not make them feel suffocated. Instead, they felt free.

And the giant needle wedged an inch into their drawn-on face did not cause them pain.

Instead, they felt pride.

“Score One For The Losers.”

The group collapsed to the floor in a sweaty, panting mess. Their body heat, along with the occasional fire spell, had turned the underground chamber humid. Despite opting to strip off their heavier or more constricting armour and outfits, the physical exertion had worn them out.

“Took no time at all,” Claudia exhaled, laying back on the floor with her eyes closed.

“I Have No Concept Of Time, But-”

“Well, I do,” Gregor sat upright and glared at his watch affixed to his wrist. “It’s been a few hours.”

“No wonder Grugg hungry,” the Cyclops complained, standing to his feet with a sigh. His hands ached, and even his feet that were hardened to rough terrain had grown tired of the hard stone floor.

“Fighting Alone You Would Not Have Beat Me. Together You Had More Of A Chance. That Is Not A Moral Lesson; You Are Just That Bad.”

“A pleasure as always, Unhap’,” Claudia sheathed The Storm and rubbed the sweat from her face with her forearm. “Dibs on having a bath first.”

“Suits me,” Gregor shrugged, “can’t stand them. I suppose it is my task to arrange us some food, correct, ser Grugg?”

“Please,” Grugg whined, rubbing his empty stomach for added effect.

*If you are not too worn out, I would like to create some stack scrolls for tomorrow.*

The Detective nodded and started towards the stairs.

“Wait,” Claudia sat up and eyed the padded training golem, “you said you would tell us why mother wrote that above the door if we beat you.”

The dummy paused as if it was about to chastise them over what counted as ‘beat’, but its unmoving face relented.

“That Message Was For You, Sister. Mother Knew You Wanted To Be An Adventurer, But She Kept You Back.”

“But...” the clothesmaker's eyes filled with tears and confusion. “Why write it here? There was almost no chance that I would see it.”

“Any Message Worth Seeing Will Eventually Be Seen. I Do Not Believe In Fate. All I Have Are Truths And Poorly Veiled Insults.”

Claudia looked up again at the message, a tear rolling down her tired cheek. It seemed too much of a coincidence. Even if her mother believed Claudia would turn to adventuring after she had passed, what would the chances be that she would end up in the safehouse basement to see the scrawling?

Grugg extended his hand for the clothesmaker to stand up. “Claudia's Mother would be proud,” he grinned. “Claudia adventurer and Detective. And murdered man.”

She playfully punched the Cyclops on the arm as she dried her eyes, a smile reaching across her face.

“Meat Man Is Correct. Although You Still Have Much To Learn. How Far Can You Send The Needle?”

“About twenty-five, maybe thirty feet.”

“Paltry. Mother Could Wield It To Sixty Feet.”

“But how?” Claudia frowned. “The thread doesn't reach nearly that far.”

“And Who Makes The Thread?”

The clothesmaker pursed her lips and looked down at the sheathed weapon.

“Does ser Dummy need anything?” Gregor rolled his eyes as he folded his arms, eager to escape whatever was happening here.

“All I Ask Is That You Return Another Day To Combat Me, Furbag.”

The ratman scowled and waved them off, heading upstairs.

“Grugg is going to help Bart with magic; want Grugg run your bath?”

Claudia looked up at the Cyclops, a distracted expression on her face. "Yes, please. I will be up soon."

As the Detective stomped up the stone stairs, the murmured sound of conversation faded out behind him as he emerged into the ground floor of the safehouse.

He sank into the couch in the main room and closed his eye. The cooler air of the upstairs was relaxing, and he shivered as it cooled the sweat from his body. Fighting as a group had been fun, but he would definitely need some rest if they had to be in top form tomorrow. He smiled as he recalled their training, the way his friends worked around his hulking attacks to trip and entangle the enemy. They were becoming more of an Udok than they knew.

Grugg opened his eye at the sound of the door closing.

"Fell asleep already, ser Grugg? I bet you didn't even run the bath."

The Detective leapt to his feet in a panic. How long had he been asleep?

'Don't worry, Claudia's already in there. She saw you were asleep; it's not a big deal.'

The cyclops flopped back down. The trial tomorrow had gotten him jumpy, nervous even. Training with Unhappy had been an excellent way to distract himself from the inevitable proceedings, but now he had to face them. Maybe after filling his belly, he decided.

For the most part, the rest of the day flew by. Grugg helped the wizard make some more spell scrolls, Claudia worked on their outfits, and Gregor mostly brooded and drank copious amounts of coffee. It was a time spent relaxing, resting, and enjoying each other's company. As the fireplace flickered and dulled throughout the evening, there was an odd sense of calm within the safehouse - a day of no danger or surprise had been achieved, and all were contented, even the Unhappy dummy residing in the basement.

The light of daybreak was a stark contrast to the amber warmth of the previous eve. The weather must have missed the memo on the occasion laboured on this day, as clear skies were all around. Even the sound of birds chirping sought to lay on the fact that Grugg should wake up - it was not just the morning, but it was the morning.

With little fanfare, he roused from the couch. Not the most comfortable of beds, but then neither was the bed upstairs. Said stairs now being a gaping expanse, he had little choice either way. He rubbed his one eye and looked over at the stairwell door as a soft thud followed by murmured cursing came muffled from within.

Gregor pushed open the door, a scowl buried down onto his red eyes. "I think I sprained my ankle," he explained at the raised eyebrow of the Detective.

'That seems like a good omen for the start of the day. Want me to heal it?'

"I'll walk it off," the ratman grumbled, hobbling through to the kitchen, "just need some coffee."

Ser Grugg?"

"Pass," the cyclops shook his head. The more sombre tone of the day wasn't as fun, but he needed a calm and clear head for the trial ahead.

A second thump came from the stairwell, followed by muttered curses that sounded like Claudia's voice.

Grugg rolled his eye. "Grugg could have helped get down," he scowled at the clothesmaker who limped through the doorway.

"It's okay, just a sprain," she grimaced in return, "that last step is a doozy."

'I can almost hear the disappointment from Unhappy through the floor.'

"Let's just get dressed, ready for Peony."

It was not but a dozen minutes later before they all reconvened, dressed in their better wear once more. Claudia wore a dull purple dress with a blue shawl draped across her top half.

"It's to try and cover the fact that I'm wearing my armour under this," she shuffled uncomfortably, "we can't all flex and burst out of our civilian clothes, Grugg."

Grugg was trying to flex around in his suit - apparently, it had been trimmed down further to be a tighter cut on his large form.

"And if things turn sour," she added, watching him squirm, "you have my permission to tear or burst from it as you see fit."

"Thanks," he grumbled, now almost hoping a fight would break out.

Gregor sat, blowing the steam from a second mug of coffee.

'How do you even sleep with all that coffee, Gregor?'

"I'll sleep when I'm dead, ser Hat. Or at least after sufficient blood loss renders me unconscious." He took a long sip from the mug. "I reckon I have a fifty-fifty chance of it being one of those today."

"Good odds," Claudia nodded. "Oh, Grugg. Something for you." She retrieved something from her luggage and brought it over to pin to the chest of the Detective's suit. It was a pin, a bright blue pearl at the tip with delicate petals of white surrounding the centrepiece. "It was a gift from Mother, for luck, she said. Ornamental rather than practical... but it reminded me of your eye." With a brief glance up at the cyclops, she smiled.

"Thank you," Grugg returned the smile. Claudia had some nice eyes, too, he thought.

The front door swung open, drawing their attention away from each other.

## **Morning! Apologies again!**

Lady Valoth stepped into the safehouse, dressed in her usual pure black attire. She also squirmed beneath a wide dress. "You all have armour under your clothes too, right?"

"Morning Lady," the Detective beamed, "Detectives ready for breakfast!"

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The location chosen by the Investigator was a small cafe on the way to the centre of town, a quaint interior decorated with pictures of flowers and the mountain range adorned the walls. A handful of tables and chairs took up the space inside, and all were surprisingly empty as the group took their seats.

"Quite quiet in here," Claudia verbalised the unspoken thoughts of everyone.

"I know the owner," Peony began, "and I paid him off." She turned in her chair to face the small moustached man standing nervously behind the counter. "Also, Markus, the hat can talk, and if you mention anything that goes on in here, I will personally remove your arm and make you eat it stump first so it looks like you are trying to crawl out of your own stomach."

She turned back to the group as the man nodded animatedly in agreement.

"Sorry," she sighed. "I am very irritable in the mornings, when hungry, and when stressed."

"Oh, I brought you something Peony," Claudia dug up a small wrapped package and placed it on the table.

The Investigator opened it and furrowed her brow. "Wedding cake?"

"Is Udok cake," Grugg shook his head, "means protect no matter cost and no secrets."

She took a bite and sighed, leaning back in her chair. "I apologise I haven't been around much; the trial was a bit more of an undertaking than I anticipated, solo."

The Detective grinned and wiggled his eyebrow. "Any secrets?"

Peony paused and rolled her tongue around in her mouth. "I'm not anticipating arresting Raulo's killer. I'm going to make them very dead. I actually have a soft spot for bloodshed." She frowned at the remainder of the cake with this revelation.

"Hoping this trial will devolve into fisticuffs then, Lady Investigator," Gregor put his feet up on one of the tables they didn't intend to eat at.

"Quite the opposite," she scowled at his bad manners, "I want this to go smoothly so we can

wrap things up in this town and head on to the next. You're bringing the mouthy punchbag with you, yes?" Her fingers drummed against the table.

"Mhmm," Grugg nodded whilst looking over her hat at the food being prepared.

"We actually beat Unhappy - that's their name - yesterday." Claudia smiled, hoping that sounded as impressive out loud as it did in her head.

"Once you can beat the dummy individually, then I might have a side case we can do," Lady Valoth watched as the food was brought out, Markus visibly shaking as he placed plates of steaming food before them.

'Oh, do tell?'

She shook her head, picking up cutlery. "Not making any promises you can't keep. Focus on today."

The cafe owner gave a brief glance at the wizard's hat before hurrying back for the rest of the plates.

A vast dish of sausages, eggs, toast, ham, and some potatoes was placed down in front of the cyclops. Grugg licked his lips. They had even found a spoon that was large enough for him to scoop up all the cooked goodies. Looking over, even Gregor had a plate of food - which he slyly picked at.

The Detective admired his team of friends as he shovelled the first mouthful of meat into his large mouth, unable to help a huge grin forming on his face.

Today was going to be a *good day*.