

Unexpected Gorilla Incident

A shroud of morning mist accompanies the clipper ship as it sails into Illustrium's only port town. A northerly wind slowed their journey east and so to some protest from his four companions, Merrys decided they should stop here until the wind changes. Besides, they're running out of grog, and this gives an opportunity to resupply.

The keel of the boat slams into the dock with force sufficient to knock Faraji off of his feet. "Oof, watch it!" the halfling yells out to Merrys.

He probably could have avoided the collision by letting Maxim steer but the automaton is busy cogitating something at the rear of the boat, and Merrys didn't much feel like talking to him.

Dongdo is a six foot five barbarian warrior of the southern forests and he does not wear a shirt. Ever. His skin is such a dark shade that only his white hair can be seen in dim light. The sudden shock doesn't move him at all, but he grunts out his displeasure at Merrys's maneuvering.

At least they're in the right spot to tie up the boat.

Finally, Maxim moves from his cogitative trance and lets down the gangplank. Each member of the group files out onto the dock.

A short, reptilian thing approaches them and the cybernetic arm mounted on Maxim's shoulder twists toward it.

"It'sss ten gold pieces per day to dock your ship here," the lizard folk hisses, its forked tongue flickering.

"An acceptable cost," Maxim replies.

Merrys idly wonders if Maxim's decision that the price is worth it was taking into account the fact that Faraji will almost certainly steal the fee back at some point. The halfling does that sort of thing frequently enough that it must register as a pattern to Maxim.

Truthfully, Merrys doesn't trust Faraji's senseless kleptomania but the halfling only ever steals from people outside the group, and such behavior has saved them an incredible amount of money.

Faraji looks back across the gangplank to see that the fifth member of their crew had not yet moved. "Somebody get his attention," he sighs.

"Come ashore Squigg, you dumbass," Dongdo calls out very loudly.

Squigg is very mentally challenged. Even among orcs, the Bard is unfathomably stupid and much of the group has made their peace with Dongdo saying so. Their green-skinned musician would have continued staring at the mast indefinitely if no one said anything. Upon Dongdo's excoriation the bard slurps the hanging bit of drool attached to his open mouth back in and replies, "Yer mum," before walking ashore.

Squigg saying that does not mean 'your mother is a dumbass.' as it might if a person with an IQ above forty said it in this context. It's just two out of the only three

words Squigg knows how to say. The third word is *Squigg*, raising the oft-discussed question of whether or not that's his actual name.

The group progresses in loose formation out of the harbor and into the town proper.

"I want to get drunk," says Dongdo, his greataxe propped up on his shoulder. "The lack of grog is getting to me."

"The lack of grog is because you got drunk on it last week, which is also the cause of your 'seasickness'," replies Merrys.

"Purpose of grog aboard sea vessel: hydration of flesh-bags," Maxim adds. "Use of grog for inebriation: wasteful."

"I'm going to the tavern," Dongdo says.

This establishment is run by lizards. Not like the humanoid lizardfolk that populate most of the town, but by tiny geckos. Merrys watches with scholarly interest as the tiny creatures act in concert to work the taps and push flagons of booze along the bar to the appropriate patrons. Mostly Dongdo.

They don't speak, but the geckos communicate surprisingly well by nodding and gesturing with their wide tails.

Even bearing the minor spectacle of sentient lizards running a bar, this is a waste of time. It would be a waste of their collective money too if Faraji hadn't snatched all the docking fees from the administrative booth and distributed the loot. This was supposed to be a brief stop to resupply and then get back out to sea.

Merrys does not care for drinking. It gets into his head for far longer than the pleasant sensations of being drunk last. Squigg's bagpipe polka is entertaining, however. How exactly the orc is able to play an instrument so well yet unable to speak any complete sentence besides 'Your mum's Squigg' is another mystery to them all.

"Maybe it's 'you're' as in 'you are mum's Squigg'," Faraji suggests, apparently thinking about the same thing as Merrys. "It would explain why he doesn't say 'A'."

A bartender gecko chirps, nodding its head in agreement.

"Statement: equally illogical." Maxim retorts.

"Maybe he's just mentally challenged and it doesn't mean anything?" Dongdo shrugs.

The polka reaches its last note and Squigg removes his mouth from the bagpipes. "Your mum's Squigg," he grunts and a new song begins.

"I'm going to go resupply, please don't all get lost." Merrys says and steps out the door.

The inside of the bar was too loud for him to hear what is now going on outside.

The town is beset by monkeys, chimpanzees, apes, and gorillas of every description and size. The market square adjacent to the tavern is in absolute chaos.

Merchants and lizardfolk townspeople fight them over every loose object in sight. Capuchins and spider monkeys crawl all over the jewelry stand and load themselves down with shiny necklaces. A huge gorilla is shaking the textile saleswoman upside down and trying to pull her coat off despite the piles of fine clothes on the stand behind her. The grog supplier Merrys made note of earlier is on the ground being kicked and beaten by a group of screeching chimps.

Merrys observes the pandemonium in stark bewilderment. "What in Titania's name..."

Squigg continues to play despite the apes rampaging through the tavern. His companions are scattered in panic. The song is not over, and so he must play on.

As the highland marching tune continues, a crowd of chimpanzees gathers around him, jumping up and down in appreciation of the music.

The short one of his companions yells something at him about monkeys, but Squigg isn't listening.

The song comes to an end at last and one of the chimps in attendance steps forward. "We must take you to play music for the Monkey King."

At first, Squigg blinks in surprise. He has never heard any creature speak with such simple eloquence before. Whenever his companions or the strange and complicated fellows they meet on their travels converse with Squigg, their words make no sense.

These hairy primates however seem able to relate to him. Squigg considers the proposition. His friends wouldn't be happy about him running off, but the idea of playing for a king of any sort excites him too much.

"Very well," Squigg replies, tenuously wondering if they can understand him just as well. "Bring me to this Monkey King."

The chimps surge towards him and work in concert to lift him over their head and file out the door. Squigg does not resist. He is going to play for a monarch, how exciting!

They carry him through the roiling chaos of the town and into the wetland jungle beyond.

Merrys, Dongdo, and Maxim stand in a circle around the destroyed remains of the grog stand.

"There goes our supplies," Merrys sighs.

"And everything else that was not not bolted down," Dongdo adds.

Maxim's vocal unit grinds out an analytical reply. "Stolen objects of dubious use to lower apes. Motive for theft: unknown."

Merrys scratches his temple. "I've never heard of apes acting with teamwork in such a large group. How many did you count?"

“Headcount: imprecise. Excess of forty-five large apes of varying taxon, in addition, unknown number of small monkeys.”

Faraji runs over to the group, hands on his knees and panting. “They carried off Squigg.”

“What do you mean they carried him off?” Merrys queries.

Faraji lifts his hands over his head, demonstrating the method used by the chimpanzees. “Like this. And they ran off into the jungle with him, bagpiping all the way.”

“Objective.” Maxim drones. “Recover companion Squigg and sea rations. Pursue apes.”

“Hurry, before those gorillas drink all the grog!” Dongdo agrees. He hefts his greataxe over one shoulder and stomps off towards the swamp in the direction the horde departed.

The trail left by the apes is immense and easy to follow even through the marshy jungle. Dropped objects are everywhere, ranging from bits of jewelry to chairs. A trail of footprints in the mud indicates that the apes are so laden down as to be walking rather than swinging through the trees.

The party is used to such rough terrain. They’d traversed mountains and swamps alike, though never on this particular island.

After a few miles, the wetlands give way to a sparser tropical forest uphill. The trail of discarded loot, footprints, and feces continues onwards until they reach a large clearing with a mound of dirt and dry foliage.

“Wait a moment,” Merrys says. “What is that thing?”

All except Faraji jog over to investigate.

The mound is a bracken nest with half a dozen white oval eggs within. There’s some empty space, not to mention a few discarded objects the apes left behind.

“Uhh, friends?” Faraji calls from a few paces behind. “You should see this.”

He kneels over a line of triangular footprints that crosses the path of the primate horde. Three long and pointed toes have left deep prints in the soft mud.

Merrys points. “Tyrannosaurus footprints. No mistake.”

“Have you ever seen a T. Rex, Merrys?” Faraji asks, taking a patronizingly questioning pose.

“No, they don’t live on the western continents, but I’ve read about them in books. They’re huge, dangerous, and unfriendly.”

“I could fight it,” Dongdo grunts.

Merrys cannot help rolling his eyes at such a ridiculous and irrelevant comment. The best outcome would be to avoid conflict with anything this big. Hopefully ever. Only some very specific planning could make such an encounter turn out well for them. Maybe if the creature has a bounty, they could consider it, but engaging the beast right now would not end well.

Maxim's shoulder arm twists, scanning the trail of footprints. "Tyrannosaurus tracks precede arrival of primates. Analysis: brood mother has no knowledge of egg theft."

"Egg theft?" Faraji asks with a scowl.

Maxim continues to drone on in response. "Structure of nest indicates—"

"We are wasting time!" Merrys blurts out. "If mama rex doesn't show up, better for us. Every second we waste, those apes are doing gods-know-what to Squigg. We have to rescue him!"

The screeching horde of primates bears Squigg and their armfuls of loot to a rocky crevasse in the shadow of palm trees. They carry him through the narrow canyon which is crisscrossed by lush vines. The path widens into a large chamber with a shallow pool. The apes do not stop, they stampede through the water.

This is good. They are carrying Squigg above them, so he does not get wet. Squigg hates getting wet.

Beyond the area with the pool they proceed into a dead end with a ton of open space. There are piles of random stolen objects everywhere and the apes dump their loot onto them. Garbage and finery alike cascade in mounds encrusted with primate feces like a reeking dragon horde.

There is no dragon, however. Squigg sort of knows what a dragon is. His companions talk about wanting to defeat them frequently, but they've never tried.

Instead, lording over the loot is a massive gorilla. Its head is the size of a covered wagon, its arms could throw one over the canyon.

Squigg's chimpanzee friends deposit him in front of the giant gorilla, and he bows before the monkey king.

"My servants who hath borne thee to mine humble palace say that thee play the finest of music." Giant tusks in the gorilla's mouth move with rubbery gums as he speaks with the same simple eloquence as the chimpanzees.

"Yes, your royal majesty," Squigg replies. "I would be honored to play for your esteemed highness."

The monkey king is clad in lush black fur. He makes a slow gesture with his tree sized arm. "Showeth me thine quality, O' bard of green skin."

Squigg begins to play.

The dark canyon looms ahead of them. Apes tracks show clearly that this is the direction they went, but there's neither hair nor paw of them to be seen.

"They must be in there, but this feels like a trap," Merrys remarks. "The most obvious entrance is always risky."

"Do any of the footprints go around?" Faraji asks, scanning the ground. "There could be another way in."

“Negative.” Maxim drones. “All tracks lead through the passage ahead.”

“What are you all afraid of?” Dongdo hefts his great ax. “They’re just monkeys. Let’s get in there!”

The distant but unmistakable sound of Squigg’s polka carries from deep within the canyon.

“Wait.” Merrys blocks Dongo’s path with an outstretched arm. “Do you hear that?”

The group listens, the music far away and barely audible.

“That’s him,” Faraji breaks the silence. “Do you think he’s trying to convey his location to us? Maybe he’s outmaneuvered the monkeys somehow.”

“That makes no sense,” Dongdo replies. “That idiot couldn’t maneuver himself out of a barrel, I’ve watched it happen. Now let’s go get him already.”

Merrys groans. Group friction is the last thing they need right now. “Well whatever he’s doing, we need to rescue him. Let’s go.”

“Taking point,” says Maxim.

Merrys silently acknowledges that Maxim going first is good. It prevents any of the rest of them from being incinerated by his lazer beams. The automaton’s warforged cogitators are extremely precise, but his targeting matrices are very unforgiving, especially at short range.

The canyon twists around a corner immediately, and a few meters ahead it nears another one. Maxim stops just shy of the turn.

“Do you see anything, Maxim?” Faraji hisses.

The automaton pauses a moment longer. “Negative. Primate contact anticipated, additional scan commenc—”

Something huge drops on top of Maxim, flattening him with a metallic clang. A backhanded swipe makes Merrys stumble backwards and fall flat against the mossy stone.

The white-haired monster rips into the warforged’s body with a rain of blows. It’s four muscular arms with clawed hands make a terrible sound as they pulverize his built in metal armor.

Its tusk-filled mouth descends on Maxim’s head, but Merrys reaches up and blasts it in the face with a searing gout of acid sorcery.

The beast staggers back, hooting and howling in pain. The thing must weigh a half ton at least.

Maxim is heavily damaged, and does not get back up, but lifts his metallic head to scan the gigantic ape. “Species: Hominidae Girallion,” Maxim identifies.

Dongdo doesn’t waste a moment, he leaps and runs across the rocky wall to deliver a flying punch straight to the Girallion’s blocky jaw. The blow sends it staggering as Dongdo hefts his axe.

A step back, and the ape finds its footing again. It winds up strike back with its claws, but before the arm can come down, Dongdo's great ax splits the monster's skull with a brutal downward swing. Blood and brains splatter against the rock wall.

"Hah, what's his genus now? Dead?" Dongdo laughs.

"State of specimen: irrelevant to taxonomy."

Merrys ignores the banter and grabs a severed piece of Maxim's left leg. He jams it back into place and drags the brutalized warforged farther back in the crevasse. At least if he's still spouting analyses no one asked for, Maxim's processors are undamaged, but the damage to his chassis is obvious. A quick mending spell rejoins the leg parts, but not enough that he'll be able to get up.

"Maxim, initiate your repair stasis, we can handle it from here."

"Repair stasis incompatible with awareness functions. Reduction in group combat efficiency unacceptable."

"I didn't ask!" Merry's snaps, throwing a pile of leafy branches and vines over Maxim's immobilized torso to conceal it.

"Requesting judgment engine override?"

"Yeah, sure, whatever," Merrys replies, already walking away.

"Affirmative." The warforged finally acquiesces, powering down with a hydraulic hiss.

Merrys catches up with the two party members not engaged in tactical robot haggling or the victim of an apish damsel in distress scenario.

He finds Dongdo and Faraji are taking cover beyond the threshold to a much larger and more well lit area. Vines criss-cross the open space and sunlight glints off a pool of stagnant water. This open air chamber is full of not only primates, but their reeking shit. Small monkeys perch on the vines like birds along a tree branch. Big gorillas, though none so huge as the Girallion, squat in the shallow water.

Faraji squints up at the nest of vines. "Say, have any of you ever seen a capuchin with a wizard hat?"

A wave of heat washes over Merrys, along with a booming noise that shakes the walls.

The third movement of Squigg's bagpipe symphony is interrupted by a spider monkey bounding past him. It falls prostrate before the king, who glowers down at his servant.

"M'lord, interlopers are invading the palace!" the monkey cries.

“Do we not haveth a sentry? Let Gerald deal with these miscreants. Why dost thou interrupt the performance?”

“Sentry Gerald is dead! A big human killed him with an ax.”

The monkey king roars and beats on his chest. “Kill them! Destroy the invaders!”

Bolts of fire blast around them, incinerating vines and leaving black scorch marks on the canyon wall.

Merrys cowers behind a large boulder next to Faraji. The rock grants them ample cover from the wizard monkey raining magic down on them. The fireball spell left them worse for wear, but the ward Merrys cast just in time probably saved their lives.

This position wouldn't save them from another fireball, but pinned down by the deluge of cantrips, they can't move without being hit.

Merrys considers the likelihood that the capuchin only had one charge of the fireball spell, but the caster being a literal monkey suggests it might simply not be using any spares.

“Where is Dongo?” Faraji shouts over the thunderous din of magic missiles blasting the boulder.

“I don't know,” Merrys admits. “If we survived that, he must have too.”

Maniacal laughter and the wet sound of a large ax cleaving gorilla flesh echoes off the walls.

“Consider that question answered,” Faraji snickers. “I'll deal with that wizard.” He dashes away from the boulder and begins scaling the rock wall.

A bright ball of orange light sails over the boulder and hits the cliff face opposite Merrys. He frantically raises his hands to cast another ward as the fireball explodes against the rocks.

Merrys's ears ring, and the smell of burning monkey shit is overpowering.

A gigantic, three-toed foot meets the ground only feet in front of him. The greenish scales of the Tyrannosaurus's leg glitter in the sparkling light of Merrys's dissipating ward.

He shudders in terror, but the dinosaur plods on past him, either not noticing or not caring that he is there.

As the tinnitus fades, he cautiously pursues the T. Rex into the chamber with the shallow pool.

Dongo has been beaten back into the corner, but the cost of his retreat is a dozen eviscerated chimpanzee and gorilla corpses floating in the shallow water and turning the mucky brown to a visceral red. He hoots and laughs as he decapitates an orangutan that was poised to bludgeon him with a rock.

The wizard capuchin launches a firebolt that washes harmlessly over the T. rex's scales, and it barely seems to notice. The enraged mother lets out a deep roar and the

swirling melee ceases. All primates, higher and lower in their order, freeze and turn towards the dinosaur.

The only thing that remains in motion is Faraji tightroping the vines toward the wizard monkey. He snatches the hat from off its head and swiftly kicks the capuchin into the pool below. It squeals as it plummets into the water and the horde of apes flee deeper into the crevasse.

The Tyrannosaurus's roar shakes the monkey king's throne room.

Up to this point, Squigg has done nothing, because he figured that the intruders were most likely his friends. But his friends do not make that kind of noise.

"Why dost thou flee?" roars the king. "Defend thy nation! Fight! Cowardice! Treason!"

Despite his brief time with them, Squigg has greatly enjoyed the company of others who understand him. Surely that is worth something, even if this king is perhaps a poor leader. No one has ever been so appreciative of his polkas.

Squigg must act, of that he is certain. He stands up and faces the watery chamber. He plays a shrill note on the bagpipes.

The chimpanzees, gorillas, baboons and other fighting apes cease their terrified rout and turn to face him. He begins, slowly at first, with an invigorating battle song. The trilling notes of his bagpipes ring off the rocks with perfect acoustics. The apes jump up and down with martial excitement.

Squigg takes a step forward, then another, marching to the time of his military anthem.

Merrys cannot believe what he is watching. Dongdo's dropped jaw suggests that he can't either.

Faraji is still lording over the whole scene from his perch atop a vine, proudly wearing his brand-new pointy wizard hat.

A tight square formation of chimps marches towards the tyrannosaurus with all the discipline and valor of a well-drilled legion. They hold Squigg overhead like a banner while he plays the dramatic notes of an epic war song. They charge towards the dinosaur, a particularly zealous chimp rushing into the lead.

The T. Rex pivots on one leg and swings its tail in a wide arc that catches the lead chimp full on. The ape flies across the chamber and dies against the opposite wall in a splatter of blood and gore.

All that remains of the unfortunate chimpanzee is a thick red stain running down the rocks.

The formation of apes stops, dead in its tracks. For a sober moment, the only sound is Squigg's battle anthem descending in volume and tempo.

The apes scatter at once, unceremoniously dumping Squigg into the water and fleeing from whence they came.

A huge, dark shape ambles into the chamber. A gorilla large enough to lift a sailing ship overhead stares down the tyrannosaurus.

Both combatants unleash devastating roars and slam together. The giants tear into each other with steak knife teeth and millstone fists.

The T. Rex gets a mouthful of the giant ape's belly fat and tears away a bloody hunk of it.

The monstrous gorilla stumbles backwards. It pauses, looking down upon the terrible wound, and the orcish bard cowering in the water below him.

The king reaches down and seizes Squigg in his giant fist.

Squigg is taken by surprise, but does not resist.

"Come bard, we must maketh our escape!" The king turns and bounds toward the wall of his throne room, the T. rex pursues at speed, but stumbles over the mounds of treasure and poop.

Squigg looks down. The king is carrying him in one hand, yet still able to scale the rock wall with ease, leaving the dinosaur far beneath them.

Despite the ascent, blood continues to flow from the king's wound. It drips against the rocks in thick, crimson rivulets.

"Your majesty... your wounds," Squigg pleads. "You must slow down."

"Thinketh of me not, regal bard," the king replies. "A thousand year reign wouldst leave me less a king than had I not heard your joyous songs."

The next step up the cliff face makes his majesty groan in agony and slump against the rocks. He hangs desperately to the rocks with one huge hand. The king opens his other palm out flat, allowing Squigg to move. "Playeth but one more song. I beg of thee..."

Squigg nods, tears budding in his eyes as he plays in total improvisation. He bagpipes out the sorrow of his heart, but the king cannot hang on much longer. He falls, a calm smile upon his regal face.