

Chapter 90 -Courting Disaster

Grugg squeezed through the narrow doorway of the stairwell, back into the main room of the safehouse - somewhat surprised to see Gregor with his feet up at the table, coffee in hand. Claudia had changed into a dark blue summer dress and was currently resting on the couch with her eyes closed. Lady Valoth stood at the noticeboard, going through her side bag for a folder of paperwork.

“Right, first off,” she began, turning to address the room as Grugg sat beside the clothesmaker, “it is good to see you are all currently in one piece for a change.”

Grugg nodded and resisted the urge to state the day was still young.

“The day is still young,” Gregor quipped from the table.

“Tomorrow is very important,” she continued, ignoring the remark, “It would do you well to be on your best behaviour. Luckily for you, I have been put in charge of presenting evidence in the trial, so your obligation to speak should be... minimal.”

Perhaps for the best.

The Detective was reluctant to agree, but on the whole, without knowing how this sort of thing was meant to be done, it was a good decision. He wouldn't want to make a fool of himself or the rest of the Private Eyes in front of the Justicar and whoever else was meant to be at the trial. At least Frank, he reasoned.

“I have met the Justicar this morning. He is... an odd one, but sometimes the most specialised tools are odd. His main role is to watch over the proceedings and then most likely escort Frank to the city once judgement has been decided.”

“Have you met a Justicar before?” Claudia opened her eyes and yawned.

“A couple. They aren't too sociable, very business oriented.”

“Strong?” Grugg asked.

“Yes,” Lady Valoth adjusted her glasses, “they have a manner of skill and training that makes them quite formidable. In more turbulent times, they form the most elite unit of the Crown's army.”

‘They are said to have some manner of divine martial prowess, a power outside the arcane.’

“Somewhat true.” Peony drummed her fingers on the held folder. “Divine is a stretch, but either way - please do not wind this man up. Justicars aren't known for their sense of humour, and you don't want to find yourself in the same cart with Frank when all is said and done.”

‘I presume there will be more security for the trial?’

“Indeed, on to the next point.” Peony took out a piece of paper and stuck it to the noticeboard - some type of building floor plan. “This is the courthouse - similar in shape and design to the Town Hall, except it has a balcony area around three sides.”

“I’ll be up there,” Gregor raised his clawed hand.

“Okay. If we are going to go about this anticipating an attack, then perhaps Claudia, if you are on the balcony opposite?”

“That makes sense,” the clothesmaker shrugged, “I am sort of ranged anyway, so that would give me a vantage point.”

“Grugg and Bart will go in middle,” the cyclops pointed a stubby finger at the main seating area on the ground floor.

“Seems best to put you into the possible fray. I will be in the seats at the front, before the judge and witness stand. The Justicar will accompany Frank so that he is protected.”

‘And the Guard?’

“Captain Wanu and a couple of dozen will be in the courthouse. Patson will be at the front doors with a couple of Alpha Team, and two patrols will be circling the building. All other patrols are being increased throughout the town.”

‘Incredible, they aren’t taken many chances, are they?’

Lady Valoth smiled. “This is perhaps an opportunity sever the head of the Helpart Nightshade for good. Even with the help of the henchman sent, Blackjack can’t keep things together himself. Bringing justice against Frank is more symbolic than just sending a greasy thug away to jail somewhere.”

“All or nothing,” Gregor murmured as he sipped his coffee. “Just as we hope they all converge in one place, they would hope for us to all be in the same place too.”

“Grugg thinks it shame don’t know where any bad guys are now, so can’t go beat up first.”

“Indeed, but the next best thing I can do is this.” Peony withdrew another sheet of paper and handed it to the cyclops, who held it up for the wizard to read.

‘Known properties of Shapechangers.’

“There are several kinds, of course. But we believe that most of these points should apply to Blackjack.”

‘Huh, pretty tough to kill, along with being hard to find. High physical resistance, magical resistance, immune to a lot of mind manipulation and arcane effects. Regeneration? Wow, we might have had more of an issue with him had he not escaped us.’

“Blackjack not strong,” Grugg shrugged, “just slippery.”

“Given that you are still undisclosed, Bart, I could not suggest that you put up some wards in the courthouse. However, once you are seated and can do it discreetly, then nobody should be the wiser.”

‘I will have a think about what I can do. Many civilians?’

Peony sighed and leaned against the side table. “I have tried to advise to keep them to a minimum, but the Mayor wants it to be showy to increase morale in the town. There will be people from the newspapers, legal council from both sides and probably five dozen or so nosey civilians.”

Claudia balked. “That many people, in almost guaranteed danger?”

“Even better,” Peony smiled dryly, “other than the main entrance, there is just one small back exit, which will be locked. The Guard will be more keen to focus on evacuating than engaging any assault - but that’s where we come in. Apparently.” She sighed and shrugged.

“Any more good news?” Grugg chuckled.

“No, I suppose that will be it for now. Be up and well dressed early tomorrow morning; I will come by around this time to collect you and take you out for breakfast before we go to the courthouse.”

Grugg beamed, and the others seemed to perk up at this idea.

“Oculi Gladii are paying the expense, so let’s go somewhere nice,” she smiled, collecting the paperwork back into her bag.

“Speaking of food,” Gregor swung his legs from the table and stood, “I need to get breakfast, so let me escort you, Lady Investigator.”

“As you wish,” she smiled with a nod.

No sooner had they waved Peony off and the door closed behind them; Grugg and Claudia looked eagerly at each other.

“Want go fight sibling?”

“Yes! But please stop calling them that.”

Like excited children, they raced down towards the basement, Claudia letting the cyclops go first to avoid being potentially crushed. They opened the door to find the training dummy standing ready.

“No Flower Or Furbag?” The unmoving face of the golem seemed somewhat disappointed despite its monotone voice.

‘Flow- Lady Valoth has business to attend to, and Gregor is getting food.’

“Does Furbag Only Fetch Nourishment As He Is Scared Of Losing?”

“Maybe.” Grugg shrugged and cracked his knuckles, rolling out his shoulders.

“Oh, I brought down the spell scrolls,” Claudia gestured to the corner where her shield lay - the pile of rolled-up parchment sitting in a neat pile. “Good time to learn, Bart?”

‘Certainly, our friend here is more than capable of resisting any that Gregor may have purchased.’

“Boring. But Learning Is Improvement, So Go Ahead.”

“Need better name,” Grugg frowned at the training dummy, “what can Grugg call you?”

“You Can Call Me *Unhappy*. With Your Progress.”

“Okay, nice to meet Unhappy.” The Detective grinned and tipped the brim of the wizard’s hat.

“Unhappy, we didn’t think to ask you before, but do you know who wrote that, and why?” The clothesmaker pointed the scrawling above the door.

“Sister, It Was Mother Who Wrote That.”

“Really?” Claudia bit her lip. “But why?”

“If You Beat Me, Maybe I Will Tell You.”

Oh, perhaps I shouldn’t have made him stronger just yet.

“Scrolls first, then we spar,” she nodded, exhaling to calm her nerves.

The scroll training was a mostly straightforward affair. The first scroll Claudia picked up was for Spark. Bart explained how to read the scrolls, how the activation of the arcane runes worked, and that she shouldn’t worry if the spell failed as scrolls for this low-level magic would not be destroyed on failure.

Grugg blew out one of the torches and waited for the attempts to begin. It took two attempts before the third shot out a tiny ember of light which lit the torch back up. The scroll, now spent, disintegrated in her hand.

“Ohh, I think I get it now,” she smiled, relief now washing over her face.

‘As you have experience in the arcane through The Storm, it is easier for you to grasp the ‘essence’ of the spell, if you will.’

“Wow, I Suppose Sister Is Saved From Unlit Torches Now.”

'Silence'

Unhappy stood, statuesque and silent.

'Neat. So, what's the next scroll?'

The clothesmaker had no issue with casting the second and third scrolls. Gregor returned with some meat pastries, and they sat in the basement eating before the ratman took his turn with the scrolls. After the first one succeeded first try, he shrugged and grinned at the wizard.

"Seems pretty easy to me, ser Hat. I don't know why you get held in such high regard."

'Pass Grugg one of those scrolls.'

The ratman handed an unspent scroll to the Detective. A flow of prickly energy coursed down his arm, gathering in his hand before a warm pop - and normal feeling returned.

'Try this one then, and you'll want to cast it at Unhappy. You can speak again, by the way - like ten minutes ago.'

"I Know, I Was Just Sulking. Okay, Furbag, Let's See If Your Attitude Matches Your Ability."

"Every night, I cry myself to sleep, as I have but one bullet left to spend." Gregor sighed to himself and held up the new scroll, his brow furrowing.

"That is sad," Grugg pouted, folding his arms.

"Stole it from a book," the ratman murmured, eyes darting across the runes and markings of the parchment.

'This one will be destroyed if the cast fails.'

Gregor licked his fangs and took a deep breath. Arcane runes glowed and danced across the page as his fur started to stand on end. With a brief vibration in the air and a puff of sulfur smell, the page disintegrated in his clawed hand.

"Oh No, Furbag Has Cast *Arcane Failure*."

The Deputy growled and turned away from the group, folding his arms.

"What spell was it supposed to be?" Claudia asked, looking at the small pile of ash now on the floor.

'If you could point at Unhappy for me, please, Grugg?'

The cyclops outstretched his arm, chubby digit levelled at the dummy.

'Arc'

A flash of light illuminated the room as a sharp tendril of lightning shot from Grugg's finger into the padded body of Unhappy, a blue glow of his shielding flickering briefly.

"Ooh, pretty," Grugg admired, blowing the tip of his warm finger.

'It needs some work; getting it to hit the right target is an issue.'

"Alright, Enough Low-Grade Magic Nonsense. You Need To Train."

"Can't argue with the talking golem," Claudia shrugged.

Gregor unhooked his whip. "I think it should be my turn since I have been feeding you both."

"That's fair." Grugg looked away sadly, unable to hide his disappointment.

"No, You Are All Too Weak. I Want You To Attack Me At Once."

The Private Eyes looked between each other, determined grins widening on their faces.

"As A Team."

Grugg bellowed out as he ran forward, the shadow of Gregor following in his stead, The Storm rising in the air above the pair - the three descending on the emotionless golem.

But inside, he was Happy.