

Chapter 94 - Verdict Dispensed

Things seemed to slow down for Grugg as the chaos ensued. The Guard in the room sprung forth to try and make a defensive wall and engage the Nightshade rushing in - protecting the civilians as they screamed and ran for the small rear exit.

He could hear the Captain shouting orders and the sounds of swords being drawn. It was momentarily an overload of sound and motion that threw him off. A robed Nightshade figure rushed towards him, skirting past the overwhelmed Guard - eyes bulging and mouth frothing with angered intent.

Whatever remaining dregs of the organisation they'd been able to drag up apparently hadn't heard about what truly happened in the mines. The man brought his pole-axe up to block Thud's downward swing with the wooden shaft. Clearly, if the cyclops was strong enough bare-handed, then using the club was overkill. The pole-axe snapped like a twig from the impact, Thud then crushing through the criminal's chest, splintering bone and sending him crumpled to the floor.

It was a brief moment that made the Detective sad. Whatever had driven this man to so eagerly attack him, was it really worth the risk to have their life snuffed out so... simply? He doubted that Nightshade could really be offering material or spiritual wealth great enough for anyone to march into the jaws of death. It was bordering on cult behaviour. It repulsed the cyclops. He felt numb to it like they were just insects beneath him. Was this how bad guys saw things?

Feet moving Grugg, this is where we are most needed. Together, as always.

Colour and sound started to bloom into life as his heart pumped loudly in his ears, and normal speed started to return as his senses cleared. A second nightshade ran at him with sword drawn, and in an attempt to duck the jab of the steel-tipped club, they instead misjudged it and got a solid faceful of the blunt end and immediately collapsed.

The crack of a whip struck a third opponent who had been levelling a crossbow at the cyclops, the pain instead causing them to drop the weapon. Gregor leaned over the balcony, grimacing as his red eyes glowed.

"Go after the big guy, ser Grugg."

Grugg nodded, trusting the ratman to watch his back as he turned to face the creature that had breached the courthouse. Anger flooded his body as he watched a Guard lifted into the air before being split in half by one of the large pincer hands of this abomination. The seams split on the Detective's jacket as he lumbered forwards to engage.

They don't appear to be attacking civilians, which is a small blessing. As the room clears, we can go all out.

With a quick glance as he approached, Grugg took in the sight of Claudia. The clothesmaker stood at the balcony weaving The Storm in between Guard, cutting and tripping the

Nightshade attackers. He smiled despite the situation and despite the looming figure of the monster before him. Was this Blackjack? That would be quite the-

He got his answer with a single word uttered from across the room.

“Dispel.”

Grugg turned just in time to see the smile grow on Frank’s face as the torches flickered and a shadowy figure rose up behind him. The Justicar stared back at the cyclops and withdrew two cards from a pouch in his belt.

A knot tightened in his stomach; of course, the boss had been right under their noses - even if it could have been anyone, the criminal just had to choose the most high-profile disguise to rub it in.

“Justicar is Blackjack,” he bellowed, just before having to block a swing of a giant claw, the impact sending him stumbling back a couple of steps as Thud vibrated.

He looked up into the tiny black eyes of the monster, one of the only features of a strange beak-like head. So this was the henchman? Shouts from his left hinted that the Captain and Lady Valoth had engaged the two other big shots.

‘Slow’

A reflective sheen ran over the red flesh of the monster, similar to the defensive magic that Unhappy had.

He resisted my spell, might have to do this the old-fashioned way.

Grugg growled as he blocked a jab from a pointed claw. Despite the size of the creature, it was remarkably fast. A second parry saw the claw slide across his shoulder, splitting his clothing and biting slightly into his flesh. He had undoubtedly had worse, and even though Claudia had said it was okay to ruin this suit, the ember of anger sparked into life within him.

A wave of cold and tingling passed over his body as one of the scrolls on his belt turned to ash, the effects of several spells layering onto him at once. He felt stronger, faster, more confident, and very on edge. Must be a coffee spell, he considered as he levelled an attack of his own, batting back the creature. Grugg grinned, ducking a broad sweep and jabbing out at one of the segmented legs. The impact caused a crack as the abomination stumbled away, screeching through its pointed beak.

Red, flashing to his left, caught his attention as one of the balcony supports was suddenly engulfed in flames. A second glow from behind him hinted at the same happening to the other side of the balcony. Blackjack’s doing, no doubt. He tried to scan for Claudia, but the giant lobster-man rushed into him, claws trying to pinch into him. Thud jumped into the grasp of one, the magic-infused club hissing at the pressure of the grip - but the second claw cut into Grugg’s left side.

The cyclops gripped the segmented arm with his left hand and allowed the rage to take over; the ember sat inside his core, now flaring up as his eye blazed. He twisted and tried to bend

away the claw in a show of strength. As the heat from his over-spilling anger burned through his body, he started to win.

With a pained shriek, the monster tried to release the grasp and move away, but Grugg held tight. He twisted the claw away, bending it towards the floor. The creature let go of Thud - this was the mistake the Detective was hoping for. As it did so, he immediately brought it around onto the pinned arm, striking at a segmented joint before it had the chance to block the attempt. Grugg let go as the joint cracked, the arm now hanging limply from the henchman and roared in triumph.

Gregor dropped down from the balcony, landing atop a distracted Nightshade criminal, his silver dagger carving a crimson gash and felling the criminal. The ratman seethed and looked over at Grugg, bellowing at the large crustacean. Gregor had liked the high ground, and now it was slowly on fire. He ducked between a Guard and Nightshade clashing and approached the cyclops to assist.

The beast was furious now and renewed its efforts to stab at the Detective. Blocking was becoming sluggish as he waved the large club around to clash with the darting claw - the occasional Nightshade criminal slowing down the tempo as they got caught as collateral. Grugg didn't care. If there weren't so many Guard and friends in the way, he could go all out and tear this place to shreds. No, that was the anger talking.

A whip-crack came from beside him as the ratman rolled into the melee, flicking a throwing knife at the monstrosity, the blade bouncing harmlessly from the red shell-like skin.

"Sit-rep, ser Grugg," he panted as he narrowly avoided the claw, "Captain is injured, Valoth is fighting Blackjack, Claudia is okay."

Grugg grunted an acknowledgement, not in the right state of mind to form a coherent sentence. "Help Peony," he managed to growl out, eye focused on the giant monster.

Gregor nodded and skirted around the cyclops, making for a run for the other side of the battle.

The large henchman saw the ratman escaping and thrust one claw into the wooden floorboards; Grugg tensed to block the attack that didn't come for him. Planks shattered, and benches buckled and shifted, causing the Deputy to stumble unexpectedly as he crested the monster's reach.

With a rush, the previously limp arm of the creature suddenly flooded with energy, striking Gregor with a hard uppercut before falling limp again. The ratman went airborne, travelling enough distance to hit the wooden wall behind the podium, a streak of blood marring the wall as he dropped out of sight.

The cyclops roared angrily, blood turning molten as his eye darted back to the monster. Hurting his friend, part of his Udok, was unforgivable. Any amount of good-natured goofball left within him melted under the fury engulfing his being.

We'll get to him as soon as possible - focus on the legs.

Grugg became a whirling blur with Thud, swinging wildly and aggressively - low attacks that caused the creature to retreat despite its long claw reach. Eventually, it stumbled over a pair of injured Nightshade, and that was Grugg's opportunity. A loud crack rang out as Thud broke one of the spindly legs clean off, setting the monster off balance.

The limp arm managed to rise up again, but Grugg struck the limb down immediately, the sinewy joints splitting apart. The creature hissed in agony as its yellow eyes radiated pure fury at the Detective. He readied another swing of Thud as the healthy claw raised in opposition.

Peony cursed under her breath, sweating underneath the damned court clothes that she hadn't the time to shed while fighting Blackjack. It was unnerving fighting the Justicar, even if it was just a false image - the way he moved revealed he was at least somewhat proficient in using a sword. The second-most concerning thing was how her strikes that had landed hadn't done much damage to him. But, by far more pressing was that the Captain had been injured, and in trying to protect his body, she had lost track of where Frank had gotten to.

Claudia's head span, trying to gauge the turmoil and chaos of the battle. The noises had persisted, the shouting, cries of agony, and moaning of the injured and dying a low din intermixed with metal clashes. She much preferred the higher vantage point - being amongst the rabble was claustrophobic.

For now, she was not being regarded with much attention, so she was content to assist the remaining Guard by picking at the Nightshade fighters. It was hard to tell being in the thick of it, but the criminal gang had thinned quicker than the Guard - perhaps things were starting to turn in their favour?

Just as this thought allowed itself a brief glimmer of hope, The Storm was stuck in something. She furrowed her brow, trying to bring it back just as a parting in the group formed and a dark shape rushed towards her - with the barest of time to react, she raised her shield instinctively.

The top of the shield splintered, a splash of blood flicking across the clothesmaker's face as the long-bladed arm of the Shadow carved through her shoulder. As her arm sagged, she tried to back step away from the approaching Nightshade boss, a grimace of pain across her face. Another wave of pain flared from her ankle, and she stumbled backwards to the floor, the second sweep of the assault causing her to unbalance.

"See, not so fun, is it?" Frank seethed through gritted teeth as he shuffled towards her, The Storm still buried deep in his own ankle.

He loomed above her as she tried in vain to discard the broken shield and retrieve the giant needle, blood running into her eye and obscuring her vision.

"Not sure who you are," Frank spat as the Shadow rose up beside him, "but wrong place, wrong time."

The bladed arms retracted, ready to pounce upon her.

"I agree, ser Frank."

A cold metal tube pressed against the nape of Frank's neck, causing him to pause.

Click.