

Chapter 82 - More Official Business

“Good Morning to the rest of you as well,” Peony shook her head at the cyclops as Gregor walked into the room with steaming coffee.

“Excellent timing, Lady Inquisitor,” the ratman smiled, placing three mugs at the dining table before bringing a larger one over to the morose Detective.

“I have some good news and some bad news. Maybe multiples of each,” she shrugged.

Bye!

As the door closed behind her, Lady Valoth went and perched on a table next to the noticeboard. “I have heard back from my superiors, and you are now officially sanctioned by the crown to act as Investigators... or Detectives if you prefer.”

“Detectives,” Grugg nodded solemnly.

“As I thought. The badges are on the way - as fast as I can grease the bureaucracy wheels, I cannot transport physical matter across distances.”

Claudia raised her hand. “Do I get one too?”

“Yes, Claudia. All four... three of you are official now. Sorry, Barthelemy - I don’t think I could swing a dead man or a talking hat with my boss.” Valoth shrugged. “Maybe if we clear you of being deceased, I can see what I can do.”

‘Understandable; I don’t mind being under the radar, mostly.’

“That brings me to the next point,” the monochrome Investigator continued. “The badges are coming from the town south of here - Galeden. Raulo was meant to head that way once things were more settled here - the Nightshade activity is spreading through Mubet, and we intended to follow the breadcrumbs to the heart of the organisation.”

“So you’ll be heading there now, I assume.” Gregor put his feet up on the table and crossed his arms.

Lady Valoth sighed and adjusted her glasses. “Correct. However... and I apologise for this information dump, but three factors are going into this.”

Grugg furrowed his brow. His head already felt full; he might need a day off from his day off. Or maybe just some sleep. And pie.

“I have received information that Gravestone has fled Helpart. Likely Nightshade are cutting their losses in Helpart now,” she pointed at the noticeboard. “Should the Dogman raid go as planned today, Gravestone would be the last of the under-bosses in town. Clearly, he didn’t like the odds.”

“I’m assuming ser Harold is nowhere to be seen today either?” The Deputy bared his fangs.

“The Guard will be looking into it later... unfortunately the raid is taking all the manpower up.”

Maybe that is a low-stakes thing we could do?

“Secondly, Lord X is not coming to the town - perhaps wishful thinking on our part. There is intel that one of his personal henchmen is coming to Helpart. Coincidentally, Frank’s trial has been moved up and is in two days’ time. The Crown has sent a Justicar to oversee the proceeding and enact the judgement doled out.”

“Justicar?” Grugg asked.

“Elite Royal Guard, they go around ensuring the law of the Crown and its assets are taken care of,” Claudia answered from behind the mug of coffee.

The Detective looked down into his mug. The dark brown liquid warmed his hands, he was still split on the taste, but it might give him some energy and stamina back. He took a few steaming gulps as Peony nodded and continued her speech.

“If Nightshade intends to give up on Helpart, it will most likely not be until after the trial. It is reasonable to assume that the trial will not go smoothly - with Blackjack and potentially a Henchman likely either to try and release Frank or maybe silence him.”

“If Grugg beats up Blackjack and saves trial, Detectives can come with Lady to Galeden?” The cyclops smiled, the warmth of the drink sinking into his stomach and making him realise he was hungry.

“You are free to pursue your leads and any investigation you wish. Oculi Gladii will furnish you with a modest stipend should your case involve Nightshade. Outside of that, earning a living will be up to you.”

“Oooh, private cases,” Grugg whispered, head turned to face the two at the dining table. “Claudia in charge of gold.”

“Only if the rest of you are okay with it,” the clothesmaker waved her hands, flushing slightly.

“Suits me,” Gregor shrugged, picking up his own mug with his tail to blow the steam away.

‘Can’t think of anyone more suited for it, out of us four.’

“Fantastic,” Lady Valoth nodded, withdrawing a folder to flick through a couple of pages. “I believe that is all of the updates from my side. Now I have the pleasure of reading the Oculi Gladii policies and procedures manual... I have no option.” A dry smile crossed her lips as she withdrew a small stack of paper from the folder and began distributing to each member - to the tune of their groans.

Just hold it up; I’ll read it and let you know the important stuff.

“Article One: Proper Evidence Handling. Official investigators must ensure the following twelve steps are adhered to when maintaining, obtaining, or distributing any amount of

evidence or supplementary objects otherwise of investigative import..." Lady Valoth began, the droning voice threatening to put the Detective to sleep.

Instead, as the words turned to background noise, he found himself chasing the memories of the previous night like ghosts. Or even like goats, he considered. As his focus shifted from the lecture in front of him, he slowly clawed back mixed pieces of the ordeal. It was important that he remember and that he took control of it. He needed to be strong.

The last vivid memory was standing outside the doorway, the feeling of the cold breeze in contrast to the warmth that suddenly overtook him as he allowed the rage to explode. From here, it got a bit hazy on the exact details. The odd feeling of the spells from the scroll pulsing effects over his body before running headlong into the open maw of the mines, the dull sound of his footsteps overblown by the heartbeat in his head.

What happened next? He remembered cracks and the heavy impact of bodies against stone... a small guard room. It was well-lit, with a couple of tables and chairs. Splintered wood and four prone bodies were the following brief images that appeared in his mind. He had barreled down the narrow tunnel like an avalanche, the occasional Nightshade figure a tree uprooted and shattered beneath his unrelenting fury.

The faint memory of bursting into another chamber and then temporary pain - followed by heat. Pain like needles - ah, probably crossbow bolts. The heat from the wizard's healing. The actual fighting was more blurry, but Grugg tried focusing on the details. He had punched, and crushed, even snapped. Nothing the criminals had tried to do even phased him, either ignored by his fury or diminished by the protective spells Bart had layered onto him.

He had then knocked down a large door and found himself in a large open cavern. They had been mining here - he vaguely remembered the wizard saying something, but he wasn't able to listen. The scene put itself back together like a large jigsaw. The scaffolding and tools reminded him of the yeti caves. Without Thud, they couldn't check for sure, but it was almost guaranteed there was a giant skull being dug out down there.

With a sigh, he calmed his spent emotions as he relived the final struggle. The large cavern had... dozens upon dozens of Nightshade in it. Initiates, half-wolves, and wholly transformed werewolves - if that was what they were - the fear in their eyes as he emerged amongst them. Perhaps the most surprising was the large figure sitting on an oversized throne at the end of the cavern.

Dogman was neither of the suspected things, given his name. The realisation had almost been enough to knock Grugg out of his rage, had the criminals not immediately engaged him. Dogman was a huge troll, a bulbous being that lounged in the rock throne in a contemptible way - even more so than the hated yeti. It had bellowed in a slow, dull tone and ordered the attack. The boss had seemed to have an even worse grasp of Common than the cyclops; it would be a mystery as to how and why he was in charge of a bunch of wolf-people.

The melee itself had no play-by-play in his brain. Claws had raked into his skin; their bones had snapped, and sparks of arcane energy and healing flashed light and heat amongst his

recollections. It had been loud - screams, roars, spells - all echoed in the rough stone chamber. All he could remember was how fewer and fewer combatants there were as the fight drew on - and the red. As he stood, exhausted and bloodied, only Dogman remained. He did not kill the troll, but he had... subdued the boss so that he could be arrested with no issue.

Emerging back into the night had felt like diving into icy cold water. Sobering. Any remaining anger was washed away, eked out as fatigue sunk in and emotions drained from his body. Neither of them had spoken during the return journey - the wizard focused on healing the cyclops, along with cleaning him of evidence of their misdeeds. Not that either of them believed that they wouldn't be the prime suspects in the event.

It left a bad taste in his mouth. It was both so unlike him yet appealed to the base core of what he was. Guilt, he definitely felt. Regret? No, he would do it over again if it meant keeping his friends safe. The fallout from the outburst would be his to bear, no matter the consequence. The worst-case scenario ruminated in his head as the memories faded away. He could be disowned by his friends, town, or even the new organisation. Grugg certainly didn't expect to be given a medal for a massacre.

Grugg?

"Grugg? You okay? You've been a bit bleary-eyed for a bit - I know this isn't too exciting," Lady Valoth waved the handful of paperwork in the air. "Rules are important, though."

The Detective nodded, fighting against his eye trying to water. He hadn't realised it, but he had scrunched the paperwork in his hands up whilst trying to think.

"Didn't the Captain say he would come to see us?" Claudia asked, partly trying to avoid further information overload but also trying to cheer the cyclops up.

"Most likely he is now taking part in the raid," Valoth shrugged. "I'm sure someone will update us on the situation soon - it was meant to be early this morning."

"I will have to prepare breakfast then," Gregor looked up from the sketches of a ratman beating up some devious-looking stick figures he had been scribbling on the important Oculi Galdii information sheet.

"Well, let's just wrap it up here then," Peony smiled dryly, almost as glad to be rid of the formal paperwork as the rest of them. "All that is left to do is make a formal declaration that you know of no reason why you shouldn't join the Oculi Galdii."

A knot formed in Grugg's stomach, and a weight sunk into him. He could feel the formation of a cold sweat coming on as he fiddled with the pages nervously. What kind of friend would he be, no- what kind of Udok would this be if he held this secret from the others? There was no way he could keep the secret in the long term, and with a spike of anxiety and adrenaline, he shot up from the chair.

"Grugg has somethin' to declare," the Detective blurted out as he levelled a nervous gaze at the Inspector.

[Lady Valoth come in. Captain Wanu speaking.]

“One second, Grugg,” the goliath held up a hand to halt him as she withdrew a message stone. “Valoth reporting, I am here with the Detectives.”

[Perfect. We have Dogman under arrest. No further arrests; all other Nightshade are casualties.]

“Great news, Captain-”

[- before we arrived on scene.]

As the hiss of Message static silenced, all pairs of eyes in the room focused on a rather uncomfortable-looking cyclops.