

Chapter 92 - Seating Plan

With bellies full and sated, the Private Eyes arrived at the Courthouse. Indeed, it bore a striking resemblance to the Town Hall - even down to the circular window above the double doors. The Courthouse was made of darker wood, and even in the glare of the mid-morning sun, it gave the structure a more sombre and professional look.

"Look," Claudia pointed out over the mountains behind the town.

Cresting over the peaks as if trying to sneak into the scene, dark clouds were gathered and plotting their dramatic entrance.

Gregor sighed. "We didn't bring the umbrella."

"Don't let the weather set the mood," Peony shook her head, "it's just the season."

The sound of boots marching in tandem diverted their attention down the road - as a regiment of Guard approached the Courthouse. At their head, Captain Wanu with Patson, but perhaps the middle of the pack was more interesting. Frank walked along, hands in the nullifying chains, alongside a figure in armour so shiny it put the half-orc's polished silver to shame.

An almost radiant pale golden full suit of plate adorned with deep golden trimmings. The shoulder pads had crown symbols embossed on them, a slight blue glow emanating from the design. There was no doubt in their minds that this was the Justicar. The man himself was tall and broad of torso, with flowing blonde hair contrasting his piercing blue eyes. Clean shaven, but with a slight scar that ran from cheek to chin.

Captain Wanu nodded to them as he approached. "Morning, Detectives. No time for social chit-chat, I'm afraid. We are taking the prisoner inside, and then you are free to enter also."

Grugg nodded and smiled as the half-orc led most of the procession past them and up the steps into the building. Patson stopped by and watched.

"I'm, uh, going to be on guard duty out here. You've got your Message Stone, Grugg?"

The Detective nodded once more and patted his belt, where it was stored safely.

Patson grinned nervously and scratched the back of his head. "I'll only message if it's a dire emergency. So if you hear it, come save me? Hah." Patson looked out to the remaining Guard heading inside, a small section breaking off to stand with him.

"Grugg will keep safe," the cyclops gently clapped the man on the back.

"Ah, Lady Valoth, and the Detectives previously mentioned, I assume?" The Justicar had made it to their position now and had stopped to nod to the Investigator. His voice was loud and commanding and probably annoying if the tired scowl from Frank was any indication.

"They are." she turned to the group. "This is Justicar Faust, and Justicar; these are Detectives Grugg, Gregor, and Claudia Ollen."

They each had the strength in them to nod and half-bow without murmuring any smart remarks. Perhaps one of their most challenging fights to date.

“Always brightens my day to meet those who so valiantly fight in the name of the Crown,” the Justicar returned the half-bow, “but now I must depart, as I fear I am holding up the procession!”

The man turned and, alongside the detainee - who now appeared to be gagged - began heading into the Courthouse followed by the remaining two dozen Guard.

“Didn’t trust his eyes,” Gregor murmured to himself.

“You do realise your eyes glow red, Gregor?” Claudia frowned at the ratman. “No offence Peony.”

“Has blue eye like Grugg,” the cyclops nodded, primarily to himself, as he had started thinking about how weird the Deputy would look with blue eyes instead.

“Keep it together, children,” Lady Valoth hissed through clenched teeth.

“You guys can go in now,” Patson piped up, if not only to remove them from being his headache. “Normally, weapons are prohibited, but if you can conceal them, I won’t tell nobody.”

Everybody turned to Grugg, the only one whose weapon was large and on display.

“Eh, just ask Captain then,” the Guard shrugged.

The Detectives nodded their goodbyes and went up the stairs to the Courthouse.

The interior was no less similar to the Town Hall than the outside, except for the balcony that ran above their heads and along the walls to the left and right. Most of the chamber was filled with rows of benches, with a slight gap before two tables, and then on the far wall, a seated podium with two wooden box-like cells on either side.

“Why is everywhere in this town such a fire hazard?” Gregor scratched his chin as he observed the balcony he intended to sit at.

“Detectives.” Captain Wanu stood in the middle walkway between the benches near the front of the Courthouse, beckoning them over.

“Remember,” Lady Valoth warned them one last time, “no funny business. I have to go prepare my statements and meet the judge; you’re on your own for now.”

“I hope you all had a good chance to rest,” Wanu smiled at them as they walked over, “I did not receive any reports of property damage or dead criminals falling from the sky, so I am assuming you did actually rest.”

“Was good day,” Grugg bit his tongue, trying not to spill the beans about the broken safehouse stairway.

“Very well...” the Captain narrowed his eyes in an attempt to pry hidden information from the cyclops. “I take it none of you have sat at a trial before.”

“Oh, I have once,” Claudia shyly admitted as the other two shook their heads.

“I imagine Lady Valoth has already briefed you, either way. There will be lots of talking; both sides read out statements-”

“And then something goes wrong, and we all die in a bloodbath?” Gregor absentmindedly filled in the sentence, still looking around the chamber.

The Captain sighed and rubbed his face as if the tension and stress would just wipe off, and he could be free from it. “I’d say the odds of that are around fifty-fifty.”

“Good odds,” the clothesmaker murmured, raising her eyebrow at the ratman.

They turned to watch the front of the chamber as Frank was placed in the wooden cell to the right of the judge’s podium. He stumbled and then was turned to face the open chamber, with the Justicar moving in to stand beside him. The side door of the cage was then locked by a Guard, who stood to attention straight outside it.

“Ser Frank sure has gotten the short end of the stick, hasn’t he.”

“In terms of being the only boss having to face actual Justice publicly, or in that he has to stand next to that towering, unsettling tool of the Crown?” The Captain looked back at them, a soft look in his eyes. “I’ve met a handful of Justicars in my years, and they’re all weird and intimidating in their own way. But then, look at who I am talking to.”

“Hey, I am reasonably normal,” Claudia crossed her arms, looking between her friends for validation.

Grugg shrugged and mouthed ‘murderer’ at her, mock fear in his face. And then a slight amount of actual fear as her eyes narrowed at him.

“We have a little while to start still,” the Captain clapped his hands once, “once the Guard are all at their posts, we will start letting the riff-raff in, and you can get seated in preparation.”

“I think we already have seating positions sorted, ser Captain.” Gregor’s eyes glowed red as he grinned at the half-orc.

Wanu shrugged. “I should have guessed you had some plan up your sleeves. I do appreciate that I have you to rely on should anything get passed the Guard. Not that I doubt their abilities, but redundancy is a safety blanket.”

“Grugg will sit at front,” the cyclops confirmed, “so can stare at Frank.”

“If you do, could you put your club at the side, against the wall? Actually, if you could sit to the side... it’s just you would block the view at the front.” Wanu shrugged apologetically.

“Fine,” Grugg pouted. If Thud had to sit at the side, then it would probably be best if he was with the club - just in case.

“Lady Clothesmaker and I will be on opposite balconies,” the ratman stated, again looking up at the one on the left.

The Detective watched the other Guard in the room mill around whilst the others agreed to their plan with the Captain. It was undoubtedly an important event to have so many in one place. He started to eye each one up as they began to line the walls of the large hall. Some of them he had seen briefly around the town before, but most he had not. Grugg imagined that some of the more capable ones would be with Patson outside, and the faces of Alpha Team would be more familiar to him.

Each Guard stood around four feet apart from the next, a sparse fence of silver armour and sombre faces. Armed with swords and shields, they stood to attention in their determined places, with a handful also heading up the side stairs to sit amongst the balconies.

By the wall isn't too bad actually - if you put your hand against it, I will be able to set up some defences for the Courthouse. It would probably have to be once the civilians are in though; I wonder how they are vetting them?

“Captain, how vet riff-raff?” Grugg blurted out, interrupting whatever the half-orc was in the midst of.

“...Oh, Alpha Team have a magical device that they will be setting up now that the civilians will be arriving. It's essentially a Detect Magic archway; I'm sure you are familiar with the spell?” He narrowed his eyes at the wizard's hat.

He definitely knows about me; I mean, we had told Patson...

“Grugg has a secret-” the cyclops began before Wanu raised his hand.

“I know. You do not have to speak it. I understand why you both kept this from me and perhaps we can talk about it when this is all done with?”

“Okay.”

Well, that was less painful than I was expecting. It is always a relief to be accepted.

Grugg grinned to himself; he would definitely agree with that statement.

“As I was saying, I will be at the front right behind the Prosecutors table. That's where Lady Peony will be seated.”

“Grugg will go ri-other side wall then,” avoiding pointing the wrong direction.

“A sound plan,” the Captain grinned, “whatever they may say about you, you're definitely not amateur. Anyway, I must do some last-minute preparation before the civilians are allowed in.” He nodded to the group and departed towards the front, a small door on the far left opened by a Guard as he approached.

“What do they say about us?” Claudia questioned, furrowing her brow.

“Only good things, when in earshot,” Gregor grinned, his fangs reflecting the torchlight. “We should go get seated then?”

Claudia briefly touched on the Detective’s arm and smiled at him as the two went for the staircase up to the balcony. Grugg went to the front left and placed Thud standing against the wooden wall so that he could lean against it. He noted no windows on the bottom floor, but there were some slim ones at the top of the ceiling before it converged in an apex.

He waved to Claudia, who sat at the front middle of the right side balcony, assuming that Gregor must be sitting above him. The double doors opened, and the townsfolk allowed to view the trial started filtering in slowly. Some who sat in the front row had notepads and pencils like the ratman liked to carry, and one even had a canvas with what looked like charcoal.

As the last of the benches became filled with the hum of quiet murmurings, the double doors closed once more with two Guard standing in front of them.

Alright, magic time.

The disquiet petered out at the front; the judge came to sit at the podium. An elven lady with grey curls and tiny round glasses shuffled paperwork on the podium before casting a gaze out at the crowd. Her plain black robes had a tall collar lined with golden thread - but Grugg couldn’t make out the pattern from where he stood.

Lady Valoth sat at the Prosecution table, whereas at the Defense table, a short piggish man with slicked-back hair leaned back in his chair, trying to adjust his shirt cuffs.

“Order in the court,” the judge tapped her gavel on the podium once, most for the ceremony, her voice soft yet filled the Courthouse easily.

“Be silent, and witness the Trial of Frank Gunes.”