

Chapter 75 - Captive Audience

Claudia rushed around to the back of the Captain to ungag him and start to remove the bindings holding his hands behind the chair while Grugg glared around the red-hued cell in case there were any traps or untoward objects that may hinder or spy on them.

"You are an unexpected sight, Grugg," Wanu coughed dryly as the gag was removed. It looked as though the half-orc had been roughed up during his capture or holding - a black eye and grazed face were the most visible of clues.

Grugg leant down in front of the restrained Captain and squinted his singular eye. "Number of statues?"

"Four hundred and seventy-five," the half-orc replied calmly, meeting the gaze of the cyclops.

"Wrong." The Detective moved a fist around, slowly bringing it in front of the Captain's face. "Four-Seven-Six." He opened his meaty paw to reveal the squat statue of the mammal that he had bought from the stall previously.

The Captain grinned as the worried creases fell from his face, soon followed by the unlocked restraints freeing his hands to take the small gift. "That's... very thoughtful, Grugg."

"You aren't too hurt, are you, Captain?" Claudia circled back to the front as the half-orc tried to stretch out his tense muscles.

"No, this was mostly from putting up a fight when Nightshade jumped me - I'm honestly surprised they didn't just kill me, but they must have something else planned. Detail report, Detective?" Wanu stood and brushed his formal clothes off, his armour probably not worn during his kidnapping.

Grugg straightened up and thought about what had happened since they last spoke... it was quite a lot. "Dungeon was all dried up; Don Kean was dead. Nightshade might be doing something... bad."

"Dead?" The Captain raised an eyebrow. "Some clarification on the 'bad' would be useful; they are a criminal organisation, after all."

No sense in hiding it from him; if they intend to do something with the Great Ancients, then we will need all the help we can get.

"Big skulls, old magic," Grugg grunted, thinking back to the trap once more. "Had evidence, but Blackjack stole it."

"You've come across Blackjack again already?"

"Blackjack pretend to be Detective, get Grugg arrested. Blackjack escaped, Grugg escaped. Everyone looking for Captain, but Grugg find because best Detective..." Grugg considered adding in the point about not being an actual Detective according to the Tax Demon but decided to shelve that for safer times.

“What about Silverfang’s gang, here?”

Oh, so this is Silverfang’s lair. I’ll assume the Captain found that out after being brought here.

“Grugg arrested them,” he nodded, leaving out the handful that had found alternative vocations as corpses. At least they were not breaking the law any longer.

“Impressive as always.” The Captain rolled his tongue around his mouth as if trying to find the words lodged somewhere in there. “I suppose we had better go and talk to Silverfang then.”

There was a palpable amount of resignation in the voice of the half-orc, which Grugg did not quite understand. Was he not looking forward to a fight, perhaps? Grugg would deal with that, even if the boss was really powerful.

I’m not going to reveal myself to the Captain yet; it might do us well to save that for an opportune time.

Grugg nodded in response to both of them. If they could arrest Silverfang now, and if that wounded wolf-person was indeed Dogman, then Nightshade would have taken a considerable blow. With Frank arrested and Don Kean dead, perhaps Gregor was correct, and there would be a period of wound-licking and infighting as new bosses wrestled for control over the power that the fallen had held. Lord X had already stated his displeasure with the Helpart gang before Grugg had even started making a mess of things.

The three of them stepped out of the crimson-lit cell into the one before it as the Captain winced with the lighting change.

“You two look pretty terrible, actually,” the half-orc eyed up their wounds; despite being moderately healed, the amount of blood on their clothes and skin would have been alarming in any other situation. “Are you going to be okay?”

“Grugg had worse,” the cyclops shrugged.

“So have I, I suppose,” Claudia tilted her head back and forth in contemplation - it had only been the day before that she was at death’s doorstep.

The Captain shook his head and smiled. “If only I had a whole squad of you, it would make my life a lot easier.”

Claudia and Grugg exchanged glances as they followed the Captain out of the door back into the corridor. Certainly, with there being five of them now they were pretty much a squad, although the Detective did not think they would want to get in any deeper with Guard work. They had each almost died or known someone close who had - as much as they had been able to disable the machinations of Nightshade so quickly, it had come at quite a personal cost.

“Captain know where Silverfang is?” The cyclops asked, readying to use the magical Orb embedded in his club to try and locate the boss.

“That I do,” Wanu sighed, “Not too far from here - although I was blindfolded at the time, I could hear my captors arguing with him.”

Grugg shrugged, and they began to move in silence, or at least as quiet as they were able. Claudia paused for a minute to strip the shredded sleeve from her dress and replace the bandages on her arm. The Detective passed her a flask which contained some kind of water that helped clean wounds - the wizard lecturing him all the while in his head that he should do the same.

“Thanks, Grugg,” she smiled as she took the other sleeve off so that it matched. “I’m going to end up covered in scars at this rate, huh?”

Typically magical healing shouldn't scar unless it's a terribly serious injury.

“Uh... Claudia will heal fine,” Grugg animatedly raised his eyebrow at the wizard’s hat so that the Captain couldn’t see.

“Ah, shame,” she put everything back into her side bag. “My mother always said scars gave you character.”

“Sometimes the best character is just living to the next day,” Wanu nodded towards the seamstress, “You have both endured enough for this town; to continue striving shows the true strength of character.”

“Make Grugg blush,” The Detective chuckled and rolled his eye. There was certainly truth to what the half-orc was saying, but they weren’t the first group to bleed for the sake of the town, only the few that remained standing.

With a nod, they resumed their search for the Nightshade boss, down the hallway away from the main hall where all the workers had allowed themselves to be arrested. The hallway turned as they passed more closed doors.

“Should we look in any of these rooms?” Claudia asked in a hushed tone.

“Best to stay on task, lest we invoke something unknown that could foil our efforts.”

Grugg agreed - the last time they opened up a room without knowing the contents, it was full of armed Nightshade elites. Another one like that, or something worse, and they could really start to get themselves in trouble. Even the possibility of food or treasure didn’t lure him into further trouble. There were still aches of lethargy that coursed through his body on occasion. Not enough to make him stumble, but a wave of tiredness would wash over him before slowly fading.

Fighting didn’t seem to make it any worse, other than the usual wear and tear of combat and exertion. As Bart had said, it seemed to be something that had touched his soul - something Grugg had never given much thought to. If he had died there, soul rendered from flesh, would he have gone to the Great Mountain, or become a ghost - or a zombie? The thought of his friends not also going to the Great Mountain made him briefly sad; where would their souls go?

He meandered with these thoughts as they trudged through the dimly lit hallways. It was cool down here. Now that the adrenaline of the fight had worn off, the underground lair was somewhat pleasant in comparison. In some ways, like his cave up in the mountains... did he really live in a cave? It felt like a different time. But also, in some ways, it reminded him of all the other miserable underground places they had been to recently. The Dungeon, the gambling cellar, underneath the warehouse where Frank hid.

When he was told the town had an underground criminal organisation problem, he hadn't thought it was so literal. It made some sense though; much easier for Nightshade to avoid getting punched if they were below the surface where the Detective couldn't see them. Not that it had stopped him so far; the amount of destruction he had wrought along with his friends was far beyond what any of them had expected. It didn't help that Grugg couldn't stop falling into Nightshade operatives, even if unintentionally.

A wave of lethargy passed over the cyclops, and Grugg yawned as they turned a corner, the path at a right angle before the walls widened towards a dead end. At the end of this passageway was a large reinforced door, the Nightshade logo painted on in a mix of black and gold paint.

This looks like the place.

"No guards or anything?" Claudia moved up close behind the Detective, whispering to the two.

The half-orc paused and turned back to them, a tired look in his eyes. "Well, I don't suppose they'd be expecting a fight down here. I wouldn't be too worried..."

"Should Grugg tell Patson to come now?" The Detective withdrew the Message Stone and offered it to the Captain.

Wanu looked like he was fighting an inner conflict on the decision before finally shaking his head. "Soon, but not yet. Let us deal with Silverfang first and see where the cards lay."

The Detective shrugged and put the magic communication stone back away. He wanted to let Gregor and Peony know how they were doing, but perhaps that would best wait for after the confrontation too. Captain Wanu being rather cagey, sat oddly with him. The usual stern and confident manner of the half-orc was gone and replaced with weary trepidation and reluctance. Perhaps it was just from the ordeal; Grugg himself had been a mess a few times lately after some rough days.

Is he waiting for us to take the lead?

The three of them stood for a moment, all eyes on the door that stood before them. It was assumed that the Captain would be first to breach as he had led them here, but without having put his best foot forward, then maybe the bulky Detective was due to take the front. That did make some sense, even if Wanu had deemed there would be no need for alarm.

Grugg slowly stepped toward the metal door, the half-orc indeed relenting the lead to the cyclops. In stopping just before it, he was confused as to how he was supposed to actually enter - should he knock? Or knock it down? He turned to face Claudia and the Captain, who

were both behind him, looking just as unsure. Grugg shook his head; he shouldn't let the presence of the half-orc shake him. This was his case - the case of the Private Eyes.

The metal rang out as he rapped on it twice with his large fist. "Knock knock," Grugg grinned, ignoring the sighs behind him.

"Who's there?" A gruff voice vibrated through the heavy door.

"Detective." The cyclops' grin widened almost impossibly.

"Detective, who?"

Grugg slammed the door open, bending and snapping whatever passed as a lock or catch, sending it swinging widely.

"Grugg is one who will be askin' questions here," he growled with the smile still on his face.