

Chapter 73 - The Incredible Bust

“He-yck!” The cry for help turned into a gargling gasp as the startled worker clutched at his throat, blood running between his fingers.

“Hells!” Claudia bemoaned as The Storm returned to her hand, the struck man dropping to the floor as he struggled to breathe. “Why does it have to be so traumatising?”

Grugg shrugged and walked over to the man, who now lay still. Perhaps in his middle ages, his eye wide open with shock were surrounded by creases. Grugg was still an amateur at guessing human ages, but wrinkly bits seemed a decent indicator.

“What if this is just something completely normal, and I’ve just murdered a man for no reason?” The clothesmaker wiped the blood from the giant needle and removed the glove.

The Detective squatted down to the unknown character and rolled him over with a gentle kick of his boot. A necklace dangled out from beneath the dirtied shirt - a silver chain with a pendant in the shape of a flower upon it. Grugg didn’t need the confirmation from the wizard but appreciated the dramatic full-stop of the acknowledgement.

Nightshade.

“Is okay, Claudia - was bad man.”

She approached the cyclops and put a hand on his shoulder as she peered down, trying to avoid looking at the large puncture wound through the man’s throat. “Seems we can’t go five minutes without falling into a group of Nightshade.”

A murmured sound drew their attention down the hallway that the unfortunate criminal had come from - a shorter corridor that ended with another door. This door too bore the floral symbol of the organisation. They sure liked their branding; Grugg shook his head to himself. If he were to have a secret criminal gang, he probably wouldn’t paste their logo across everything, even within an underground hideout. The sound continued at a measured pitch, slightly increasing or decreasing at intervals.

“Conversations, probably a lot more of them than we can handle?” Claudia looked worried, perhaps not keen on getting traumatised any further than needed.

“Grugg *must* investigate.” The cyclops stood and placed his large hand on the clothesmaker’s shoulder. “If too dangerous, we can turn back now.”

“We have to find the Captain,” Claudia closed her eyes and sighed, “It’s not too dangerous, but let’s try and get by with as little bloodshed as possible? They may be criminals, but many of these people are townsfolk.”

The Detective nodded and stretched out his arms, leaving Thud slung away. If there was one thing he was good at, it was solving conflict with his words. That, and having a false sense of social ability. He very much doubted all of them wanted to die, and unless they had some kind of special force, then most average humans would stand no chance against him.

“Let’s go make some new friends,” he rumbled with a smile, the reflection of a pale blue light-gem adding an eerie look to his single eye.

As they trudged towards the doorway, the sound of voices became louder, if still muffled by the metal door in front of them. The voices were jovial and relaxed, which gave Grugg the impression that it was more of a social setting and they’d be more receptive to his charismatic plea. The door did not seem to have any lock on it, but he placed his hand gently upon the cool surface.

There’s a Magic Lock that is in place but currently open. No traps or anything; the signature is different than the two previously.

Grugg turned to Claudia and raised his eyebrow for a ready check, which was returned with a determined nod that did well in hiding most of her panic.

With a deep breath, the cyclops pushed open the door and stepped into the room beyond as confidently and matter-of-fact as he could manage.

The sound of conversations and general rowdiness faded quickly with each step, and nearly thirty pairs of eyes immediately turned to face the sudden appearance of the large Detective. Tables dotted the room, with chairs occupied by all manner of supposed lumberyard workers. Most were human, but there were a couple of dwarves and a very tipsy-looking ogre over near the back. It seemed like they had been in the midst of a booze-and-food session in which Grugg had rudely made himself an uninvited guest.

“Hello,” Grugg began, suddenly tongue-tied under the glare of so many people, “Grugg is here to rescue Captain.”

“Ya won’t take him from us-” a gruff worker began to shout in defiance before being elbowed harshly by a colleague.

“Ah,” the Detective smiled, lowering his head so just his toothy grin was visible beneath the brim of the burgundy wizard’s hat. “So Captain *is* here.”

Nice work, Grugg.

A low murmur spread around the room as many a scowl was levied at the recoiling man who couldn’t keep his mouth to himself. They were definitely getting uncomfortable now and were trying to figure out the best way to get rid of the large lump in their doorway and retain ownership of the prisoner.

“Grugg doesn’t want to murder anyone,” he calmly stated, trying not to bring up the unlucky interloper back behind them in the tunnel. In fairness, that had been Claudia.

The scrape of a chair across the floor screeched out inside the large room as a tall, muscular man with shaved head stood up to address him. “Well, we can’t let you get through to the boss or his prisoner. So perhaps we will have to ask you to politely leave.”

The cyclops took a step backwards to block the doorway and took up a defensive stance. “Grugg declines.”

Chairs were scraped and tipped all around the room now as more and more disgruntled workers stood and drew makeshift weapons. Then, as one, a throng of bodies ran towards him, shaking fists and shouting a ragtag assortment of adlibbed warcries.

As they made the short distance towards the Detective, some of them tripped or stumbled in with pained exclamation. Claudia crouched behind the wall of Grugg and sent The Storm out from between his legs. Looping and twirling around just above the floor, catching around ankles and slicing the sides of legs to dampen the surge of attackers.

With some of the energy removed from the angry mob, the wave of their attack met the Detective at a slight disadvantage. With his giant fists, Grugg reached back and... pushed the first attacker away. The second also got a similar shove, tripping backwards over a man nursing a cut ankle. Soon, as the assailants were pushed away into the growing mass of sprawled-out bodies, their assault faltered and stopped.

“See, no murder,” the cyclops shrugged and grinned down at the struggling workers.

Of the few lumber yard criminals that hadn’t made the mistake of rushing headlong into danger, one of the dwarves, along with the ogre, came to stand behind the complaining scrum, arms folded. The ogre seemed to be enjoying the situation perhaps even more than Grugg, but the beardless female dwarf looked less impressed. She wore her black hair up in a tight bun, and a long scar ran from her hairline down to her cheek. Her light leather armours over the basic workwear suggested she was either specialised or held a higher position than most of the other lot.

“Spouse we find ourselves at a bit of an impasse, ey Detective?”

“Yes. Can’t pass Grugg.”

“Hmph,” she shook her head, “We are no more keen on total bloodshed than you are, it seems. For one, boss’ll tan our hides if half the workforce turns up dead.”

Hopefully she doesn’t mean that literally.

“But also, boss’ll give us a proper tongue lashing if we let you just walk away with the Captain.” A dry smile cracked across the dwarf’s face as she levelled a slight nod at the cyclops.

Grugg held back a laugh, his goofy grin shining through as he cleared his throat. “Nightshade criminals, now are all under arrest.”

Even the squirming bundle of complaining and pained bodies quietened at this declaration, once more confused as to what to do.

“You heard him; back to your seats,” the dwarf shouted. “As of now, we are all under arrest; anyone who has any disagreements - I’ll let Lurk know that you need your thinkin’ adjusting.” The ogre beside her cracked his knuckles to further the point, even if his booze-addled eyes were unfocused.

Grugg relaxed as the murmuring workers slowly returned to their tables for their food and drink under the chastising glare of the dwarf. This was probably his most considerable success yet; so many arrests and no need to kill anybody! Well, maybe just one. He nodded at the surprisingly helpful dwarf after she finished glaring at the last of the stragglers.

“Naturally, we will exercise our right to remain silent on any further matters, Detective. But if any of the lads step out of line, well, I’m sure you’ll give them what they deserve. Off the record, though, my name is Hanna.” Although she smiled at him, she tightened her crossed arms as though recoiling from any attempt to shake hands.

“Thank you, Hanna.” The Detective made his way into the room, Claudia following behind, both aware of the eyes on them. It could have easily been a trap, but most of the workers didn’t look as keen to die as they had a few minutes before.

That was an odd interaction; I suppose it made sense - if they keep up their end of the deal on our way out.

Grugg knew he didn’t have restraints for the job. Other than bodily harm and the harsh words of the dwarf, he doubted he could confirm their arrests. Unless he called for Patson and backup - but they should probably locate the Captain first. Then all the Guard on patrol could come to help move the prisoners.

“One thing I don’t understand,” Claudia spoke with a low voice to the cyclops, “No doubt after finding the Captain, we will be going after their boss, and they’re okay with that?”

It’s a fair point. Either they don’t think we are a threat to him, or perhaps he isn’t here, or we won’t find him.

The Detective shrugged and grunted. He would crush that bridge when he got to it. But, for now, all he cared about was finding where they kept the food- no, all that mattered was finding the Captain. As they reached the doorway at the other end of the room, he turned back to see every worker in the room still with their eyes on him. A mix of anger, distrust, and confusion. Except for Lurk, who was waving to the cyclops with a gormless look on his chubby face.

After passing through the doorway into the next room, Grugg closed the door behind them with a long sigh. “Less stress if Grugg had kill them.”

‘It’s nice when everything isn’t a fight to the death, though.’

“I agree with Bart; I’d like to space out my killing, just for my conscience’s sake.” Claudia wiped the sweat from her forehead with her sleeve and sighed, looking around the new room.

Much smaller than the last, this one had one large oval table with about a dozen wooden chairs surrounding it. Perhaps a meeting room of sorts - *rats*, Grugg thought, they must have missed the kitchen already. A painting of Helpart hung on one wall atop a faux fireplace, similar light gems to the ones along the walls instead putting off a deep orange glow from within. But, aside from a couple of empty side tables, there was nothing else of interest.

Grugg looked at the two doorways exiting this room. "Hmm, if only Gregor here to help."

As if by narrative fate, just as he had finished his sentence, the door to the East opened, and a figure walked in. Unfortunately, not the ratman, but as the eyes of the Foreman grew wide at the sight of the cyclops, the Detective smiled deviously and cracked his knuckles.

"Red! Grugg needs some help finding Captain."