

Chapter 95 - Flight Risk

The shot rang out through the courthouse.

Every figure in the chaotic skirmish paused momentarily as all eyes darted over to where the loud noise had come from. Even the most pensive gaze took in the view just in time to see the limp body of Frank drop to the floor, the Shadow around him dissipating and mixing with the converging smoke from the fires that clouded the apex of the room.

With this brief punctuation, the end of a life, the mood changed within the courthouse. As Gregor pocketed the spent pistol, grimacing as it brushed against the open gored wound in his chest, he extended his clawed hand to help the clothesmaker up. The decrease in morale for the remaining Nightshade combatants was almost palpable as they saw one of their bosses drop and stay down. The tide of battle was pushed in the favour of the Guard and bloodied detectives.

Blackjack ground his teeth together and pushed the interloping Investigator, causing her to trip over the wounded body of Captain Wanu. Frank had continued to be useless and fall short of expectations. Perhaps he should have expected this, but then again, all of his underlings had come undone in such a short time that it was hard to process.

The shapeshifter drew two cards; the first evaporated as a shield of fervent lighting twisted and arced around the form of the Justicar. As Lady Valoth struck out at him, the shield buzzed and flashed, the goliath dropping her sword and holding her numb arm as she seethed with glowing eyes.

“So sorry,” he snarled back at her, the blue eyes of the Justicar blazing through the haze of the courthouse, “Court is adjourned.”

The second card hit the floor and burst into a wall of fire, spreading a dozen feet high and almost twice that wide, cornering him off from most of the fray. Time to make his departure, he sighed. What a disappointment and setback for the plan. He would need to rebuild and start-

Grugg burst through the wall of flame, leaping through the air as the fire scorched and ran along his body - one of his protective spells flickering orange as he landed and punched the shapeshifter with his left fist. It stung as lightning cracked across his knuckles, slightly numbing his hand. Blackjack flew backwards into one of the balcony supports, the metal armour of the Justicar denting as the wooded beam buckled from the impact.

The Nightshade boss barely sidestepped, the follow-up swing from Thud - the club striking and snapping the plated arm of the shapeshifter and carrying on into the wooden floor. Grugg grimaced as another flicker of lightning jumped from the shield through Thud and into his arm, causing him to drop the heavy weapon to the floor. The cyclops watched with grinding teeth as the Justicar’s arm snapped back into place, good as new.

“You can’t hurt me like that,” a humourless smile crossed Blackjack’s face. “There is nothing left for me here; I bid you farewell.”

'Slow'

Blackjack frowned as his intended movement was waylaid, with the massive Detective launching himself at the criminal. Grugg's singular eye flared bright blue as he opened his arms wide and grabbed the Nightshade boss in a tight bear hug.

"Not. Going. Anywhere," he seethed through the fresh agony the shield wrought against him.

Lightning scorched the Detective's skin, burning through his clothes and crackling against him as he refused to let the boss go. Grugg growled as the pain coursed through his body, the mix of pained emotions fighting against the rage and spells empowering him and keeping him going. The smell of burnt fabric overpowered the courthouse's blood, sweat, and smoke.

'Healing Pulse'

"You just won't give up, will you?" Blackjack snarled at the cyclops as he shifted into a new form, away from that of the Justicar.

Pain flared across Grugg's chest as the shapeshifter dropped to the floor, having changed into a creature with bladed spikes along its back. The remaining tatters of his suit shirt and jacket fell to the floor alongside drips of crimson. As he went to pick up Thud, the beast scurried away, shards of floorboard bouncing into the air from the missed impact as he swung wide. Blackjack vanished through a small gap that had burned out through the wall to the outside.

"Go after him, Grugg; we'll finish them off here. It's down to you," Peony called out.

Although he was glad to see she was mostly uninjured, looking back at the room behind him filled him with all sorts of panic and dread. Across the other side of the courthouse, Gregor was holding a crimson-speckled Claudia up, the ratman himself with a large chest wound and fur matted with blood across half his face.

Between his friends and himself, utter carnage. Bodies lay strewn across the floor, Guard and Nightshade alike. Smoke clouded the roof as the balconies continued to burn, the heat of the large room almost unbearable if not from all the destruction leaving a few holes to the rainswept outdoors. The Captain lay with injuries to his arm and head, his eyes closed, and brow furrowed with sweat. The large bear was trying to limp away near the entrance as the Investigator engaged it, her blade flashing red through the air.

We need to go now, or this will all be for nothing.

He regained his composure and ran, half stumbling before crashing through the courthouse wall and landing heavily on the wet stone street. The darkened clouds above pelted him with rainfall, which was briefly cool and relieving. Looking around, he could not see where the criminal had gone. The downpour and his pumping heart made it hard to hear anything but.

The pin Claudia gave you melted and stuck to him when the lightning ran through you.

Grugg looked down at his mostly bare chest, now crisscrossed with burns and cuts. Whatever remained of the top half of his suit and shirt now fell to the floor, the attempt to stay in some form now given up the ghost. Now he was annoyed that the shapeshifter had stolen the good luck pin as well.

He held up Thud and let the wizard activate the magical item inside his prized weapon's metal head. A pulse of white light from the Moonchaser Orb ran through the sodden neighbourhood, the ping of the highlighted pin showing up around the corner, quickly moving away. Trying to ignore the pain, he set off after the criminal, Bart occasionally pinging the location.

Grugg remembered that he hated the rain, and today was no exception, even if it felt nice against his burnt and worn body. His heavy footsteps pounded through the cobbled streets, the occasional ping of the Moonchaser Orb pointing him to the whereabouts of the shapeshifter. A left, almost crashing through an awning and squeezing through a waterlogged alleyway. Until it stopped.

As he approached the melting pin's resting destination, he regarded the structure with a narrowed eye. It didn't look like anything fancy or very defensible. Some kind of warehouse or storage building, it was hard to tell in the rain. It looked abandoned, perhaps just chosen for the lack of people around to bump into Blackjack in the odd creature form. Dark recessed windows stared back at the approaching cyclops as his boots increased in pace.

Grugg barrelled through the door, sending splintered planks clattering within, as he immediately rolled across the smooth wooden floor - avoiding a card sent towards the entrance. A fire lit up the remains of the wooden planks as the thrown object burst into flames, alighting the dry interior. He was not lucky enough to avoid the second card, which engulfed his leg briefly before leaving singed clothing and burnt skin.

He growled and regarded the figure who had flung the blasted rectangles - but paused in surprise.

An old man stepped out from the shadows, the highlight of the pin fading away within his person. Orange robes that had a red strip down one flank, a long curled white beard, a world-weary face, and upon his head, an orange wizard's hat.

'Harlan?'

"So you really are the brother, somewhere in there." Blackjack twisted the mouth of the brother into a wry grin as his hand gestured towards the wizard's hat.

'If you can copy him you...'

"Apologies," Blackjack rolled his eyes, "shame you spent so much time and energy on playing 'detective', and here I'm just going to reveal to you I was part of the team that killed him."

“Team? Who else?” Grugg growled, gripping Thud tight, taking a slow step forward.

“Like I'm going to stand here monologuing all the secrets. When you can't even work out that you're unable to beat me.” The faux-Harlan folded his arms and shook his head, a confident, cold glare regarding the Detective with disdain.

“Grugg has one thing to say to that,” the cyclops growled, his teeth bared in suppressed rage.

“Go ahead; it'll be the last thing you-”

‘Light’

“Oh, for f-” Blackjack threw out a pair of cards in reaction as the blinding white filled the small chamber.

The first was wide and struck the wall, blowing a hole in the wooden structure and allowing the rainfall to beat against the interior. The second card struck Grugg in the collarbone area, cracking the bone and embedding, cutting as if it were a steel blade.

But as the blindness faded, the Detective now held the upper arms of the shifted wizard, pinning them to his side.

“I *really* hate that trick,” the Nightshade shapeshifter moaned, rolling his eyes.

‘Dispel Magic’

The visage of Harlan burned away to reveal the grey, featureless natural form of Blackjack.

“That one is even less fun,” he added, “but it is of no consequence.”

Grugg watched with clenched teeth as the grey fingers slowly elongated out like thin knives, which then stabbed slowly into his forearms. He growled in pain as the needles burrowed further in, his grip slightly weakening.

“I'm going to kill you both and rebuild Nightshade like nothing you accomplished even came to pass. I will also murder all of your friends... one... by... one.”

The Cyclops buckled to a knee as the pain grew too much to bear. But he didn't let go. He couldn't let that happen to his friends. The flame of his rage was petering out, and he could feel his arms grow slack as blood ran down them from the twisting fingers puncturing his normally tough skin.

I'm sorry for this, Grugg; please forgive me.

A wave of sickening lethargy washed over the Detective as he fought to remain conscious. Black veins protruded from his arms, snaking towards his hands as his heartbeat drummed in his ears so loud he barely heard the following words uttered.

'Remove Soul'

A buzz of silence rang through his ears as everything went dark. The press of wood against his numb body suggested he was on the floor.

The air was tinged with the smell of burning wood and acrid sulfur. Was he still alive? It felt like he had blacked out; his vision and strength had faded in tandem.

Grugg blinked and shook away the ringing in his skull as he threw up. He rolled into a sitting position and gasped for air; his arms struggled with the action as they were weak and bloodied. A cool wisp of the rain-laden breeze swept through the ruined doorway and brushed against his bare head.

With panicked eye, he looked around to see the burgundy peaked hat sitting on the floor several feet away. Tears flooded his blue eye as he tried to move but couldn't.

Footsteps broke the sound of rainfall, and then a grey, featureless hand reached down and picked up the hat. The blank face regarded the object and stepped stiffly towards the exhausted Detective.

Grugg tried to speak, but his mouth was dry, his vision blurring as tears rolled down his cheeks.

The figure squatted down next to the distraught cyclops and, with a brief contemplative pause, tore the wizard hat in two.

"Well now, that didn't quite go as planned, huh?"