

Chapter 53 - Uncondensed

“Knock knock,” Grugg entered the Guard headquarters with a smile. Over the course of the walk his headache had faded, and his appetite sated, in part thanks to the wizard. The other part was thanks to whatever animal meat he had eaten; he wasn’t so discerning as to ask the butcher where it came from. The woman with the short black hair was at the front desk again, but the smile she returned did not have the degree of sincerity he did.

“Here to see the Captain, Detective? I can see if he is free.” She waited for his nod of approval and then pressed on a flat Message stone affixed on her desk. “Captain, the Detective is here to see you.”

[Good. Send him in.]

The woman nodded towards the door, her face almost screwed up into a grimace as she increased effort to maintain the fake smile.

Not a fan of ours, it seems.

Grugg said nothing so as to not look extra strange. The lady seemed nice enough to him, though. Although few could compare to how friendly Claudia was. At the thought of the clothesmaker, he looked down at the Alarm stone, the dull red gem embedded in it indicating it was inert. In all his fuss on trying to put the stone holders onto his belt, they had settled for affixing the Alarm one to the strap of Thud’s sling. He knew it was inevitable that it would see some use eventually, and the longer it didn’t flare up, the more on edge about it he was getting.

The Detective opened up the door to the private office, a wide array of small animal statues greeting him. Equally interested in his entrance was the half-orc, who nodded and gestured to the low bench.

“Afternoon, Detective. How goes the investigation?”

“Okay,” the cyclops scratched his chin, trying to recall all that had happened recently. “Beat up Fixion. Got some clues.” He had decided on the way over that the Captain could probably be trusted with their dungeon-delving intent.

“It seems that thanks are due, once again, for apprehending the criminal after his escape. It was perhaps to all of our benefits that he was so headstrong in testing his strength against you and didn’t go underground.” The Captain sighed and leant back in his chair.

Speaking of underground...

“Uh,” Grugg began, furrowing his brow beneath the brim of the wizard’s hat. “Grugg think he know where Don Kean is.”

For a brief moment, the Detective thought that the Captain’s eyebrows would float clean off of his face as they rose in surprise. Instead, Grugg lowered his gaze to the multitude of statues that cluttered the desk of the half-orc, feeling awkward that this information had made its way so easily to him.

Wanu eventually broke the silence. "Don't keep an old guardsman in suspense; we've all but scoured this town looking for traces of the spymaster - where do you think he resides?"

Grugg pointed to the floor, a gesture mostly obscured by the desk and forest of ornaments, but he elaborated using his words. "Below town. In Dungeon."

"A Dungeon?" The Captain drummed his fingertips on the edge of the desk as he looked towards the ceiling, seemingly deep in thought. "There is a section beneath the sewers that was closed off some time ago after the Great Rat Uprising. So you are saying he has constructed some kind of lair down there?"

The Detective nodded. "Was clue from Fixion. Seemed genuine." Grugg rubbed his tongue around in his mouth. Did he really just use the word 'genuine'?

"And if my assumption is correct," the half-orc closed his eyes, "You are planning on investigating this Dungeon. With your team, I hope?"

"Yes, sir."

"I had figured something was up when I had the expense request forms from Patson arrive on my desk. Eleanor Greyjoy must be pleased to have some Guard coin in her coffers once more."

It sounds like he has a history with Eleanor; try to prod. No, not literally!

Grugg lowered his arm. "Captain knows Eleanor?"

The expression on the half-orc's face softened, and he gave a brief, sad smile. "We used to outfit the Guard from her emporium - until the Mayor wanted to cut costs and import. The quality is fine, but it doesn't feel right to not support local." He shrugged as he looked around the room, eyes resting on his sword, which was propped up by his desk, threatening to topple some nearby mammalian ornaments. "Some of the guards will even save up their own coin to spend there, but I am sure her business took a big hit from the change."

"Sounds like Mayor not very liked."

"Well," the Captain shrugged, "He is an acquired taste, let's say. The town has done okay under the years he has presided, Nightshade blooms notwithstanding. Personally, it surprises me he had enough votes for a second term. But, I'm not one for conspiracy theories, so I'll leave it at that." The smile returned to the half-orc's face as he eyed up the Detective.

I may be reading too much into it, but it sounds like he is implying the Nightshade rigged the election for the Mayor.

Wanu picked up a file from his desk and flicked through a couple of pages. "The Twins denied knowing Harold, despite their physical reaction to his name being said. Harold had an alibi for his short disappearance and could only say he might have offered them stable work but chastised them on their tardiness - hence their apparent fear for the old man." The Captain peeked from the page to gauge Grugg's reaction or comment.

It's a reasonable tale; we happen to know a little more than we are letting on, though.

"Grugg not convinced," the cyclops raised his hand to his chin in an effort to act like he was giving his discerning thoughts to the situation.

Harold may be the next target on our list; we at least have some information on him. Hopefully, once we shake the prying eyes of Don Kean, our investigation can renew.

"I didn't think you would be. But, with your hands full of Dungeon, ensure you don't bite off more than you can chew."

The Detective grinned. "Grugg have big mouth." Determined to prove the point, he opened his maw wide. While waiting for the half-orc's approval, he remembered the other important information to bring up. "Grugg also see Blackjack today."

Captain Wanu sat in shock for a second as he was still trying to process the show before his brain caught up. "The Blackjack, from the letter? Helpart over-boss Blackjack?"

"Yup. Can change to look like others," the Detective furrowed his brow and narrowed to a squint at the supposed Captain. "Could be anyone."

We need a secret phrase, perhaps, to make sure future Wanus are the real one.

As Grugg reiterated the idea to the Captain, the half-orc pondered for a second before speaking. "Ask me how many animal statues I own. There are one hundred and fifty-three in my office here and... three hundred and twenty-two at my house." He avoided eye contact as he revealed the extent of the collection. "For a total of four hundred and seventy-five."

"Four. Seven. Five," Grugg repeated, thankful enough that the wizard would probably remember that better than he would.

"Of course, there's no way to know if that is accurate without counting yourself - but at least it's a consistent number. Nobody else would have heard that, as my office is magically soundproofed. Only you and I know."

Ooh, I've never felt like I am a spy before. Probably half the time, I am just staring at a wall or ceiling whilst you sleep.

Grugg nodded, "Grugg has no secrets though," he lied surprisingly quickly.

The Captain gave him a stern look, but the corners of his mouth upturned in a barely concealed smile. "Of that, I doubt, but how about we just use the same number in the event that Blackjack feels it sensible to try and imitate you?"

"Okay." The Detective tried to imagine a second Grugg, which was more attractive than he for some reason. Blackjack knew about the wizard now, and no doubt the rest of the Nightshade members would soon be informed that their cover-up had been botched beyond reason. As if he didn't already have enough targets on his back, he grumbled internally. If only they could be as direct and brazen as Fixion, too. If he had to fight, he would fight. But shadows and sinister eyes upon him just made him irritable.

“You have certainly been busy, as always, Detective. The town owes you much, and should you be successful in the Dungeon and are able to apprehend Don Kean... then it shouldn't be long before the Crown hears of your exploits.”

I'm not sure how I feel about that.

The cyclops smiled as he imagined the Crown had its own personality as the wizard's hat did, to be able to hear about all the criminals he had been arresting and beating up. He wondered if the King was a hapless pawn that had accidentally stumbled upon the position and was just along for the ride. Probably not, but it was certainly an entertaining thought.

“If that is all, Detective, then I will send you on your way with the best of luck for your investigation.” The half-orc rose and held out a hand to be shaken, to which Grugg responded to the gesture as gently as he could.

With a mutual nod, he left the Captain's office, only picking up a daggered side-eye from the woman at the front desk as he entered back onto the cobbled streets. The overcast sky had mullied into a darker shade of grey, threatening a light rainfall. It was only natural, as the umbrella that Gregor had so generously bequeathed to Grugg sat back at the safehouse, being just as valuable as not having one at all.

Did you have any tasks left to accomplish today, friend? I was thinking we could pick up some warm food on the way home, and we could relax and await our supplies delivery. I have been wanting to practice lighting candles a bit more.

The Detective grunted and nodded, it had been a hard week, and he would need all his strength for the Dungeon. Also, warm food sounded well earned from all that running after the shapechanger. He might even treat himself to another bath this evening, oh - just the thought of it made his eyelid droop in contentedness.

It was not long before they found an open shop that sold warm pastries, and he spent a couple of gold on a healthy pile of meat-filled treats. As the streets cleared with the impending rainfall, the rush of a sharp breeze was helpful in keeping him awake and alert. Bart noticed no foul energies watching over them, and anyone following their tail was at least considerate enough to be undetectable. As Grugg attempted to sneak a third pastry before meal time, they finally arrived at the safehouse, and the cyclops squeezed through the front door.

'Spark'

A quick dazzling light zipped through the air and caught a single candle, plus one of the wall lanterns, alight in one swift motion. Grugg clapped at the display, thoroughly impressed at the double hit.

Not too bad. There are still four lanterns and seven candles in the room that I missed.

The Detective placed the bag of food on the table next to the single flickering candle and sat on a chair to remove his boots. Wiggling his short, stubby toes, he sighed with relief that they were now free from the stuffy confines of the heavy footwear.

Just as he was about to tuck into what remained of their bounty, there was a short knock at the door.

"Who there?" he called out, not wanting to expend the energy to get up again.

"Lady Valoth"

"Lady Valoth, who?"

"Lady Valoth, who has some information for you," a loud sigh punctured the door.

"Huh," Grugg grunted from the chair, "Not very funny."