

Chapter 87 - Under Trained

"You think he is working with Nightshade?" Claudia sat back down in the safehouse as Barry closed behind them.

'Although he was very prickly, I didn't get the impression that he was working with them.'

"Maybe just turning a blind eye," Gregor shrugged, "as long as the town is still functioning."

"As long as Grugg doesn't have to talk to Mayor again," the cyclops shook his head. "Or eat Mayor."

"Let me just get some more coffee going, ser Grugg, and then we'll pop open the basement." The ratman walked off towards the kitchen, a smile across his face.

"Count me out," Claudia sighed, "I'm not looking for any trouble today. If there is some kind of pit fiend or labyrinth of terror - not interested."

Grugg nodded with a smile. Out of all of them, the clothesmaker was probably the one that deserved the rest the most. He turned to look at the noticeboard. Blackjack was going to be an issue - whether the boss stayed in Helpart to regrow Nightshade, or even fled - nobody would be able to tell if his disguises were good enough. The box taken from Don Kean's room must contain information about the large underground skulls; perhaps the Guard would try to seal those back away.

"Is Justicar normal?" He asked the room, more thinking aloud than expecting a concise answer.

'For this kind of trial? Not common, but perhaps they are looking to make a big deal of it. Show the organisation that the Crown is serious about cracking down on them?'

"Usually, they ship out high-profile cases to one of the cities," Claudia added absent-mindedly as she started to dig through her luggage case again.

'Ah, so it is also bait.'

"How Bart mean?" Grugg scratched the side of his head as he started to realise he didn't really know what a trial was in human terms.

'Holding Frank accountable, there is a chance that it would draw some of the remaining Nightshade out of the woodwork to either rescue or silence him.'

The Shadow had been quite worried about the remaining bosses trying to get rid of his potentially loose tongue, Grugg remembered. That's why the criminal had been placed in the Guard's most secure and tamper-proof cell. It did make the Detective wonder, though... if Blackjack was able to kidnap and imitate the Captain, would he have also been able to find and free Frank (or kill him)? The answer must either be he couldn't or he could but didn't, for some reason.

“Here you go, ser Grugg.” Gregor returned from the kitchen with a large steaming mug and a smaller one for himself.

‘Oh, I wanted to ask - where did you get the coffee from?’

“I made it,” the ratman shrugged, handing the larger mug to the Detective.

‘No, I mean, where did you get the coffee beans from?’

“Beans?” Gregor frowned with a blank stare.

‘You know what, forget I asked.’

“I usually do. Come then, ser Grugg - let’s unveil the mystery of the basement once and for all without further distractions or hindrance.”

“Good luck!” Claudia called as the pair went through the stairwell door, putting some pins into a small boar-shaped pincushion.

Gregor blew the steam from his coffee as they stood in front of the metal door that allegedly led to a basement.

Grugg placed his mug on the stairs before joining the ratman. “Gregor can pick the lock?” He squatted down to cast his eye over the door - which now bore similar to the one found under the lumberyard building.

“Only under duress,” the Deputy tilted his head with a wry grin.

The cyclops grabbed the ratman by the collar and pulled him closer, his single eye blazing bright blue. “Don’t know what duress mean - unlock the door.” Watching the red eyes of Gregor widen, the Detective put him down and looked away. “Sorry, Gregor. Grugg have angry problems.”

‘We aren’t going to be in the town for much longer - a little bit of structural damage won’t be our problem in a few days.’

“Oh, now that I’ve outed myself as a slight villain, every ser and ma around is fine with breaking the omelette eggs?” Gregor crossed his arms whilst holding his mug and turned away from the others. “But yes, just break it down, ser Grugg.”

“Okay,” the cyclops shrugged and wound back his steel-plated boot.

‘Wait, we should probably-’

The mighty kick connected with the door frame connected to the wooden stairs, the cracking and collapse of the wooden planks causing the door to fold inwards into the recessed landing within. A further groan resounded through the house as the weakened supports around the stairs collapsed, sending most of the staircase tumbling into a downward stone staircase - cluttering it.

“What’s the point of the door if you can just break through the wood around it?” Gregor coughed away the cloud of dust and smell of sawdust.

“Don’t want to know!” The muffled call from Claudia came from the other room.

“Oopsie,” Grugg grinned as he started to pull the chunks of broken stairs out of the way of the basement staircase. “Don’t tell Captain.”

‘They’ll be glad to see us leave the town at this rate.’

“They should start making houses from stone,” Gregor leaned against the wall to sip at his coffee. “Plenty of it around.”

‘You can put the written suggestion on one of the pitchforks, I’m sure.’

“There’s not much farming here; I doubt they’d have enough pitchforks for a-”

“Shhh,” Grugg turned with a thick finger on his lips. “Grugg says rest mouths, is rest day.”

They waited silently as the cyclops cleared most of the larger pieces of wood, the grey stone of a short staircase leading to another metal door now revealed. Grugg grunted, pushing the once staircase door out of the way to traverse down the steps. He leaned down to observe this new door and placed his large palm on the cool surface.

No magical traps or locks.

He tried the handle and was equally surprised and disappointed that the doorway opened - the cold air from the underground chamber escaping through the small gap into darkness. Gregor came up behind him, one hand on his whip whilst the other still cradled the warm coffee. Oh! Grugg looked down to see his empty mug amongst the remaining debris, dark patches of dampness indicating the fate of his drink.

With a slight pause to inhale deeply, he flung the door open, the hinges letting off a slight high-pitched squeal from lack of use. In the dim light of the chamber beyond, he could barely make out a grey humanoid shape standing a dozen or so feet into the room. Grugg clenched his fists and readied them.

‘Spark’

The basement illuminated. A dark stone room, almost entirely devoid of any furnishings or details aside from the dust and cobwebs of age. The figure in the room was human in size and rough shape, seemingly made of stuffed bags of off-white fabric.

‘A training dummy?’

The round head raised, a badly scrawled-on face levelling at the Detectives.

“I Prefer The Term ‘Training Assistant’.”

Gregor groaned as Grugg gasped in awe. “Does assistant have name?”

“Name Is Irrelevant; I Am Here To Assist With Training.”

‘How did Patson forget *this* was what was in the basement?’

“I’m not sure the payoff was worth it,” Gregor squeezed passed the cyclops to walk around the room. “What good is finding a talking inanimate object this late in our time in Helpart? Where were you before we had to do all the fighting, ser Dummy?”

“I Was Still Here.”

“Grugg thinks trial will be big fight; good to get more training.” The Detective grinned widely and walked up to the figure, extending his large hand to be shaken. To his glee, the training assistant lent out its hand in kind.

Some form of golem - it’s magical, but strange I couldn’t pick it up before. It has many spells woven into it, a veritable feast for my hungry mind.

“How strong is trainer?” Grugg asked with a raised brow, letting go of the hand despite the wizard’s desires. “Grugg doesn’t want to break.”

“You Are Far Too Weak To Break Me,” the reply came from the odd, unmoving face.

Grugg’s fist flew out with surprising speed, striking the torso of the grey dummy. The trainer somehow raised its arms just in time for the strike to hit and slid across the dusty floor several feet from the impact. A flicker of blue light appeared where the fist struck, but otherwise, the dummy appeared no worse for wear.

“Too Slow. Too Weak.”

The cyclops growled and hunched down, ready to leap forward, his singular blue eye blazing.

‘Wait, wait. It’s probably not a good idea to get angry right now. We would like to keep the house standing. Gregor, why don’t you have a go?’

The ratman shrugged and placed his coffee mug on the floor by the wall, followed by removing his jacket- handing it to Grugg. He unhooked his whip and exhaled through bared fangs as he got into position.

“You Think You Are Accurate Enough With Such Weapons?”

The whip cracked forward, missing the head of the dummy by inches as it leaned away from the attack. Gregor rolled as the whip made its return journey; a throwing knife flicked out of his hand during the manoeuvre - knocked out of the air by the trainer. He withdrew his silver dagger with his off-hand as the whip surged forth again, this time wrapping around the ankle of the opponent.

The ratman pulled on the whip, intending to rush forth on the dummy with his dagger as it stumbled - but instead, the grey figure pulled its own leg back with incredible strength, leveraging the whip from Gregor’s hands and sending him collapsing to the floor.

'Wow, that was neat.'

The Deputy stood up and dusted his padded jerkin off, glaring intently at the wizard's hat as he clenched his teeth together.

"Nice one, Gregor," Grugg beamed. This was a *fun* new friend.

"Yes, well. Perhaps ser Dummy will be useful in our time off." The ratman shrugged, taking back his jacket from the cyclops and returning to his coffee.

'Training Assistant, who do you belong to?'

"I Belong To No Person. I Am My Own Thing." The disjointed speech contrasted eerily with the apparent amount of self-awareness it seemed to have.

'Interesting. We are leaving Helpart soon. Would you like to come be our Assistant on our travels?'

"If You Promise To Grow Stronger And Not Bore Me So Much."

Gregor groaned again. "I can guarantee that ser Door is going to follow us to our next residence too, correct?"

"Grugg think so."

'We should tell Claudia; I actually think she would be interested in this.'

The cyclops nodded. "Gregor, have important task. Private Eyes will need lots of good food and coffee for training."

With a nod, Gregor withdrew his notepad and pencil and scrawled within. "Food... and more coffee... *'beans'*." He glared at the wizard's hat.

'Why are you saying it like that? Oh, if you wanted to get some spells scrolls from Eleanor too - I assume you are magic resistant, Trainer?'

"Your Paltry Magic Would Not Harm Me."

'...'

"Hah," Grugg chuckled, "Assistant very annoying. Makes Grugg want to fight more."

Aside from the four torches surrounding the room, it was indeed as bare as their first impressions thought. A literal room just for fighting this one nigh-impossible opponent. It seemed almost like a dream for Grugg, who was itching to get back into it. Perhaps once he would out of the suit, however.

"Assistant okay to stay here until Grugg and friends come back to prepare?"

"I Have No Need To Leave The Basement. No Wants Or Requirements Other Than To Fight Weaklings Like Yourselves. As Is My Duty"

“Sounds good then,” Gregor shrugged, putting his notebook away.

Grugg nodded and turned back to the staircase to go and get changed, but paused and looked up at the wall above the doorway where some letters had been scrawled.

I'm Sorry, it read.