

Chapter 67 - Upping the Antsy

“What? I’m not...” the anger in the Captain's eyes faded as the realisation of Blackjack settled in.

Grugg clambered to his feet and strained against the chains shackling his wrists to the wall. The roiling swirl of magma that was his anger, usually hidden far beneath his surface, began to broil and bubble deep within his gut. They had taken his friends away, locked him up, made Peony sad by killing her partner, and were now trying to put all the blame on the Detective. And now, this criminal stood before him in a parody of the Captain, not remembering the number of animals they had agreed - which Grugg couldn't remember either, but that's not the point.

It was time to bring the ugly side of himself out again, and as he could feel the pressure of rage start to consume him, his single eye bore into the off-guard Nightshade boss. The terrible squeal of metal reverberated around the wall as he strained against his constraints, the thick iron chains trying to decide which was the weakest link against their will. Veins bulged in the wide neck of Grugg as he reddened with effort.

Blackjack knocked the chair back as he began backstepping away slowly, unsure as to whether the chains would hold. Aside from the cell that Frank was still being kept in, the useless thug, this was the most secure room in the headquarters. Murdering the Detective might have to be the option here, although that would be harder to shuffle under the rug...

Grugg growled, his face contorted in a mixture of hatred and struggled against the fortified structure of the room holding him in place.

Just a couple more seconds... and there!

The ping of thick metal caused the cyclops to lurch forward as his right arm swung free widely. A thick chain hung from his manacled wrist for a couple of feet before the shorn link ended, now unattached from the wall. He used his right hand to grab the chain just past his left wrist and lent his whole body to the attempt to be entirely free.

Blackjack, still in the guise of Wanu, paled. Now seemed like an excellent opportunity to leave the cell and avoid any potential conflict. He reached into the half-orcs clothing and withdrew two rectangular cards from a hidden pocket. As he went to raise them, a sharp pain radiated from his wrist.

Grugg had swung the loose chain around from his right like a whip and knocked the cards to the floor. They both immediately burst into flames, causing the area around the crime boss to be engulfed in fire. Blackjack swore and jumped out of the way, trying to pat the alight trousers out as he was scorched from the forced error. The faux-half-orc glared with clenched teeth at the straining cyclops.

“You really are a problem; I should have just killed you when I-”

‘Light’

The figure disguised as the Captain winced but held their arm to their eyes too late. White light bleached the small room, blinding him. Then, as he fumbled for something else in his coat, the sound of the second chain breaking and a grunting lurch of heavy feet made him panic as he grasped for a trick to escape.

Grugg grabbed Blackjack with both hands across the midsection, pinning both arms to the flailing criminal to their sides. The Detective lifted them off the floor, and their legs kicked out uselessly. In putting as much pressure as he could muster, he attempted to crush the fake Wanu, but even with his unleashed anger, his weakened state couldn't gather the strength to crumple his adversary.

Only, as he looked down at the pinned Nightshade boss, he wasn't there - it was Claudia, who looked up at the cyclops with tears welling up in her eyes.

"Grugg, I'm sorry - please don't hurt me."

Despite his brain burning up, telling him this was just a trick, he still softened at seeing his friend sad. His strength waned, and his grip started to loosen as his rage started to falter away.

'Neutralise.'

A course of energy flowed through his weakening arms into the body of Claudia, her face contorting in weird, unnatural pain. Grugg watched in horror as the visage of the clothesmaker melted away, leaving a smooth, featureless head of grey. The dress and clothes fell away too, revealing a slim figure of strange material that reflected in the dim light of the cell. Anger flared back up in the Detective, and he threw the figure at the back wall.

Blue light shimmered up the wall from the impact as the magical fortification of the room was tested, and Blackjack fell to the floor. Rather than stand, he started transforming - Grugg grit his teeth in confusion as the body morphed into that of a giant spider, multiple limbs tapping around the wall. The Detective launched himself towards the arachnid with a heavy boot outstretched.

"Shrink," the spider hissed through a face not designed for vocal casting.

Another flare of light as Grugg's kick missed the target and slammed into the reinforced wall, the spider-criminal suddenly reducing in size. The cyclops clenched his fists as he watched the creature shrink down to no more than a couple inches across before leaping and trying to punch out at it. Blackjack was fast now in this form, and fists, chains, and feet clashed against the wall in succession as the spider dodged the torrent of furious attacks.

Patson yawned as he sat outside the cells. It was not typically his duty to be a prison guard, and it had confused him when the Captain formally requested he take up the post. Wanu had been acting slightly strange all day... and this whole business with Grugg, it didn't seem fair to him. Perhaps there were just some things he wasn't privy to knowing.

A vibration lightly shook the hallway. Strange, it didn't look like thunder out earlier. Then, another vibration, soon followed by a second, then third. That wasn't normal... was it coming

from the cell? Naturally, he couldn't hear anything; perhaps he should knock and just check - even if the Captain was in a bad mood.

Sweat ran down Grugg's head as he slowed, the exhaustion beating out his rage as the frustration at not being able to strike the small spider was just tiring him out.

Sorry, I don't think I have anything I can lock onto him with; his signature is too small.

A knock at the door caused the Detective to glance around as it slowly creaked open.

"Captain? Are you okay... Ca-" Patson started before his mouth dropped open, staring wide-eyed at the freed cyclops and lack of Captain.

"Was Blackjack!" Grugg yelled in response, pointing at the ceiling where the spider was - or had been. He glanced around wildly for where the Nightshade arachnid had gotten to.

The door!

He turned too late, just spying the back legs of the spider, fading through the top of the threshold.

"Patson - spider is Blackjack." He grunted and made his way to exit, the shocked Guard doing little to stop him from leaving the cell. In the corridor, the Detective paused to look around for movement - the area was dotted with shadows and small gaps in wooden boards that the small creature could easily hide in. Grugg shook with rage before finally venting with a long sigh. A wave of sadness and lethargy washed over him as he dropped to the floor to sit.

'Patson, any idea where the real Captain is?'

The Guard yammered some silent words as he struggled to take stock of the situation. "W-who am I addressing?"

'A concerned citizen. Where is the Captain?'

"He seemed his usual self when he went on his patrol to the South this morning; after that, he just seemed distracted or like something had put him in a bad mood."

'South as in, lumber yard South?'

"I believe so - hey, um... I suppose the charges against you are dropped?" Patson scratched at his messy thatch of hair. "I don't think I can legally make that call, but if it was Nightshade making the charges, then they don't really stand either."

'Not to worry, Patson. Detective Grugg will need his gear and the rest of his team. Also, if you have anything to remove curses, that would be helpful.'

"Yes, come with me, Mr... uh?"

'Hat.'

With a groan, the cyclops stood and moped his way along behind the Guard. If he was already spent emotionally and physically before, then now he was in a pit. He was borrowing fingers from others just to not collapse and pass out. As he led them to the armoury and storage, Patson availed them of more details.

“Miss Ollen was only here for minor charges, so we escorted her home a little while ago. Unfortunately, Gregor, we were unable to track down in the sewers. He did injure one of our men, though.”

“Hope nothing bad,” Grugg offered.

“Nothing life-threatening, piercing injury straight through Danigs lower leg. Probably just to make them stop; thankfully, he didn’t fall in the muck.”

Piercing injury? It seems a bit overkill to stab straight through someone’s leg.

Patson pointed out a crate in the dimly lit storage room. “That’s all your gear, Detective. Let me go look for that curse remove; we might have something for emergencies.”

This was definitely an emergency, the cyclops thought; it felt like he was ready to sleep for a week. But, at the same time, it also felt like the day was just starting in terms of what needed to be done. The belt attached around his waist, and Thud went back into the sling. Even his club felt extra heavy in his weakened state. To think he used to last of his energy in trying to squash a bug. At least he wasn’t going down for murder, yet.

The box from Don Kean’s room isn’t here.

Bart was right; all their dungeoneering items and gear were present, save for that one important piece of loot. “Probably important if Blackjack steal it,” Grugg grumbled, still a bit sore about walking straight into the trap that guarded it.

I agree. The spell used to defend it was... higher level than I can comprehend. There are arcane users that reach the pinnacle of power and can use a spell that can kill with one word. This was similar... but different. I believe it was Remove Soul - I’ve briefly read about it but didn’t think such a thing was possible.

“Seem same thing,” the cyclops shrugged, leaning against a desk as he waited for the Guard to return. So whether he was dead or his soul left his body - that was the same outcome, right?

There’s a slight difference, and it has implications of- oh, Gregor is watching us with his magic eye.

Grugg looked up to a random corner of the room and waved.

I’m not sure if he said that he could hear through the vision - hmm.

“Meet Claudia’s,” Grugg said slowly whilst tapping the Alarm stone pinned to his cloak.

Okay, the energy has gone now; he must have gotten the idea.

Footsteps as Patson stumbled into the room; his arms weighed down with an assortment of potion bottles and scrolls. With a grunt, he shoved them off onto a counter by the Detective. "Normally, this isn't allowed, but the Captain isn't here." He brushed his hair from his face as he slightly flushed. "Specifically, *I* am not allowed to do this - it turns out potions can be pretty addictive, huh? So which ones do you want?"

Grugg oggled the different coloured bottles strewn in front of him. Different yellow, orange, green, and blue hues reflected back at him. Some of them swirled with internal energy, and others had tiny sparkles dancing within.

'The Focus, Regeneration, and Stamina potions should be enough. Also, the scroll of Curse Removal if you please.'

Patson nodded as Grugg popped each cork in turn and downed the contents of all three. A buzzing warmth immediately filled him from the stomach upwards, the miserable fog clouding his mind cleared, and he stood taller instead of lethargically stooping. The Guard passed the scroll over, and with the cyclops holding it, the wizard cast it onto him. It didn't have much noticeable effect, but that could just be the effects of the potions overriding everything else.

"Er, Grugg," Patson pointed, sliding one of the unchosen bottles into his pouch, "The stone."

Grugg looked down at the Alarm stone, blinking as energy coursed through his veins.

The Stone blinked back at him in a bright red warning.