

Chapter 76 - Silver Tongue

A slow clap resounded from a prominent figure sitting at a wide, sturdy desk. A large orc, almost as big as Grugg but much more muscular rather than pudgy, sat on a tall chair at the table. He wore a fur-brimmed brown jacket with nothing underneath beside a few scars across his chest. The orc was grinning, his wide jaw full of sharp teeth, two tusks brimming from each end. A glimmer caught the Detective's eye as the right tusk was plated in shining silver. To the side of the desk, a tall, rugged man with short blonde hair and a rather dusty suit stood to attention beside the orc.

"Ah, Detective Grugg, Miss Ollen, and Reggie - I've been expecting you all." Although the low growl of the orc filled the room, there was a rich, elegant tone to his voice in contrast to his rough appearance.

Reggie Wanu?

"Silverfang," the Captain rolled his eyes. "How have you been keeping?"

"Always so formal," Silverfang huffed and turned to the man next to him. "Apologies Crane, we will have to postpone date night. Be a dear and pack our things for Operation J, would you?"

Crane nodded towards the orc and then to the paused party, "Certainly, Silver. Guests." He left the room behind the Captain, who did nothing to intervene.

"Please, take a seat or two," Silverfang gestured at the cyclops. "I wasn't sure whether you'd be coming or not, so I didn't prepare - my apologies."

Wanu sighed and sat, slumped on one of the chairs. Grugg pulled one out for Claudia to sit on and then pushed two together to fit on himself. Silverfang lit a long pipe and relaxed on his throne, blowing a cloud of smoke towards the ceiling.

This is an unexpectedly calm situation so far.

"I'm sure you know why we are here, Silverfang," the Captain began, sitting forward on his chair with hands resting on his knees.

"Oh please, can't even call your brother by his first name anymore?" Silverfang rolled his deep brown eyes but smiled at the half-orc.

"Brother?" Claudia and Grugg said in unison.

"Never any secrets around you, huh, Edward? But yes," Wanu turned to the confused pair, "Same mother, different fathers."

"Not that it matters any, still the same blood." Silverfang drew another puff of smoke from his pipe. "I've probably created more questions than answered, though."

“Grugg would like some answers, Captain.” The Detective levelled the statement as more of a confused statement than as a demand, but his brain had been awash with different issues since the Demon filled his head with doubt.

“Very well,” the half-orc pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed, “You do deserve some truth after what you have been through. Yes, I knew about Silverfang - Edward. He has been working undercover in Nightshade since they started up in Helpart.”

“I was just the lumber yard owner before, but they saw the manpower under me and the respect I commanded for my workers... they made me a deal that I felt I could eventually overturn and bring the town back how it was before.”

“Silverfang still criminal, though?” Grugg scratched his chin and narrowed his eye at Edward.

“We try to do the minimum possible without drawing attention,” Silverfang shrugged. “We are mostly a money front for Nightshade in the area - the lumber sells real well further South, so putting that into their pockets without getting our hands too dirty has worked out.”

“So why were you holding the beat-up Captain?” Claudia rubbed at her bandaged arm, which had started to itch.

“Blackjack still calls the shots,” Wanu answered for him, “Ed still has to play by the rules when it comes to the pecking order.”

“Aww, ‘Ed’,” Silverfang pouted. “It brought me great shame to hear that Fixion was also working for Don Kean in secret. He is a good man. Oh, what happened to all my workers here, Detective?”

“All arrested. Almost all.” He corrected himself, thinking of the errant guard that Claudia had murdered, and he definitely hadn’t.

“And Blackjack’s goons?”

“If you mean the five in dark Nightshade leathers, then they are all dead,” Claudia stated bluntly, slightly guilty over the one normal worker she had killed.

“Amazing! You should have found these guys years ago, Reg; they will be taking your job next.”

Captain Wanu rolled his eyes, but his expression had softened somewhat. “Detective Grugg and his group have excelled where others had not, and we are fortunate for what they have-”

“Grugg not Detective, though.”

The half-orc clucked his tongue and looked into the big blue eye of the cyclops. All other eyes watched him back, awaiting his response.

“It’s... complicated. For all intents and purposes, you have my authority to act in a manner that benefits the Guard and Helpart as a whole...”

“But?” Silverfang interjected, the whisp of smoke from his idle pipe twirling in the air.

“But, to be an officiated Detective Investigator under the Crown's jurisdiction is a long process, and they have been finicky with appointing ours as the last handful had turned up... dead.”

“So Grugg have badge, but Grugg does not have power of law.”

The Captain sighed and folded his arms in resignation. “Essentially. I apologise, Grugg; I was desperate and needed your help to fix this town before things worsened.”

That explains why we weren't on the Town payroll, at least.

“Grugg can still punch criminals?”

“Yes,” Wanu offered, “Nothing you have done will get you in any trouble, nothing that I know that you have done, at least. You are still authorised to act as a Detective in Helpart for the time being. Now that Don Kean is dead-”

“Wait, the Don is dead?” Silverfang almost dropped his pipe in surprise, his large green hands fumbling for it.

“Killed himself activating some ancient evil skulls. Know anything about them?” Claudia sat with her arms crossed.

The orc sucked on his teeth, ruminating on an answer. “I knew that Blackjack and the higher-ups were interested in something in the area. Frank was pottering about in the mountains; Don Kean was spending more and more time in his Dungeon, Blackjack was insistent that we build this underground lair for some reason-”

I think I can guess why.

The pulse of the Moonchaser Orb filled the small and modestly furnished room, the few side cupboards and drawers engulfed briefly in light before it faded away in the eye of the cyclops.

“Hey, you should ask a man before you use magic in his house. Or boss chamber.”

Grugg slowly looked around the room, before stopping. A giant skull loomed in the corner behind Claudia, some several dozen feet within the earth. This one thankfully not looking straight back at him.

“Where Blackjack want to dig, deeper?” Grugg turned back to the orc, a sour look on his face.

“Correct, this was the first layer, he wanted us to dig a couple more, but my workers much prefer logging to mining.”

Just how many of these are around Helpart? Are there any further afield?

Grugg frowned. It was hard enough trying to explain the skulls with having seen a few; would people really understand the gravity or weight of it when they had not had the displeasure?

"Nightshade is plotting something with some buried ancient artefacts," Claudia spoke up in seeing the thoughtful cyclops, "Some manner of old magic, powerful."

Silence filled the room as the information sunk into the two brothers.

"Silverfang know much about Gravestone and Dogman?"

"I've never met either of them. Gravestone is supposed to be a magic user, running some gambling rings and the like. Dogman is the greenest member, and I'm not sure what he is in charge of. Probably picking out bad names." Silverfang smiled and tapped his pipe onto an onyx gem ashtray.

"You know what comes next, though, right?" Captain Wanu gave a humourless smile at the large orc.

"It is definitely time," Silverfang nodded back to his brother. "With Frank arrested and Don Kean dead, I feel more secure in being arrested too. Putting myself and my workers out of the picture puts Nightshade in a very weak position in Helpart."

Claudia pushed some red hair from her face. "You think they'll return to infighting and recruiting new bosses to fill the gaps?"

"Could do," the orc nodded, "They could withdraw to lick their wounds - but they might become desperate too. Try and launch a surprise attack and take the head off the snake." He pointed the end of his pipe between the cyclops and the clothesmaker.

"Grugg is tough," the Detective snorted.

"They have tried and failed already." Claudia agreed.

Silverfang smiled widely and gestured towards the Captain. "Looks like the war will soon be over, Reg. Let these guys loose, so hopefully I won't have to spend too long behind bars."

Wanu's expression softened once more. "We will do what we can, brother. They'll be more useful than the scant information you've been able to give me."

"Hey, no fair! You should hear about all the things I stopped from happening. And you know that it was hard to get information out with Don Kean sticking his ugly nose into everyone's business."

"I know, I know," the Captain waved him off. "Things could get rocky after this, though. Are you ready?"

"Reggie, if they see you walk out of here safe and sound, they'll know something is amiss. I have to take the loss. You know I'm the tougher one out of the both of us anyway." Edward beamed and thumped his chest softly to emphasise his point.

"Wait!" Grugg growled as he stood up suddenly, knocking the two chairs clattering to the floor, levelling a finger at the orc. "How Grugg know you are not Blackjack?"

Silverfang tutted. "I admire the suspicious mind, Detective. Captain, pray tell what I have tattooed on my right buttock."

"What?" Wanu groaned. "Curses on you for making me remember that, but it's a crab holding an axe."

"Correct!" Silverfang beamed. "And would you like to make the confirmation, dearest brother, as it would be beyond the pale for me to bare myself to your fine Detectives."

"Thanks, Grugg," Wanu muttered under his breath as he stood and went over behind the desk.

Well, this was certainly a direction I didn't imagine our adventure would take today.

"Yes, it's him," the Captain grumbled again as Silverfang sat back in the chair. "Next time, you'll just have to beat him up to find out."

"Blackjack weak, likes to run," Grugg huffed, slightly amused at the displeasure of Wanu.

"You've faced him before, then?" Silverfang raised his eyebrows. "Shapechangers are a strange breed; I'm not sure I've even seen his true form."

"Grugg has. Strange, grey, faceless, and uses silly cards."

They use an innate illusion ability to change form, but it's not magic in the same sense as the spells I cast - so I could only briefly dispel it.

"You crack their head, and this whole operation starts to crumble." Silverfang bit his lip. "By the time they send a replacement of his level, the rest of the Nightshade would have been run off."

"One step at a time," Wanu shook his head. "You'll be chasing shadows if you make that your goal. Frank's trial will be coming up soon. Keep your head down and let Dogman and Gravestone sweat it out for a bit - you deserve a rest."

"I could certainly go a day without immense blood loss," Claudia admitted, "Or worrying about you or Gregor dying."

Grugg smiled. Taking it easy did sound nice - even if there was so much left to solve. He supposed even Detectives had days off. He was pretty sure he had tried to take a rest day before and just ended up getting swept up in something dangerous in short order.

There was a short squeal as the broken down opened slightly, the rugged head of Crane poking through. "Everything is packed and prepared."

"Thanks, hun. Well, Detective, would you like to do the honours?" Silverfang put his pipe down and stood up, a wry smile on his wide jaw.

“Okay,” Grugg addressed the large orc, his singular electric-blue eye glowing beneath the wizard's hat.

“Silverfang now under arrest.”