

Chapter 83 - Soft Words

Grugg opened and closed his mouth several times like a fish out of water, no sound coming forth.

“What... what did you do, Grugg?” The question hung in the air, Lady Valoth slowly furrowing her brow as the unspoken truth sat like dead weight in the room.

“Sounds like the Detective had some fun without us,” Gregor smirked, shaking his head.

“Grugg! You shouldn’t be putting yourself in unnecessary danger like that,” Claudia pouted disapprovingly.

“So let me get this straight,” Lady Valoth pinched the bridge of her nose as she removed her glasses. “You went into the Nightshade hideout last night, on your own, and subdued and arrested the whole gang?”

Grugg looked down at the floor and knotted his hands together. “Grugg went with Bart.”

‘I will admit to my part in this, I suppose. Although, there weren’t many left that would fall into the subdued and arrested category.’

Peony closed her eyes, head raised to the ceiling, as she let out a long sigh.

“Can’t poke me about murdering one guy anymore, Grugg,” the clothesmaker shook her head. “Not after you massacre what... a dozen or so at once?”

‘There were a few more than that.’

“How many were there, ser Hat?”

‘...’

“How many were there?” Lady Valoth repeated, her eyes glowing a far more commanding presence than the ratman's.

‘Around sixty in total.’

“Grugg didn’t kill *Dogman*,” the cyclops murmured, still looking at the floor.

Gregor whistled as Claudia sat back in her chair in shock. The Detective looked up to see the Investigator grinding her teeth, a pained wince reflected across her pale face.

“I’m not even sure where to begin with that, Detective. It was reckless - a danger to both yourself and our investigative efforts in Helpart. You let your emotions get ahead of the law.” She strummed her long fingers on the side of the table. “However, it is hard to chastise you for the results. People often assume Detective work is staring at footprints and looking at changes in dust - and that *is* part of it. But, a great deal of it is being in the wrong place at the right time or sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong.”

‘That is one of the reasons you took a shine to us, correct?’

“Indeed. Grugg has an almost destined knack for stumbling into trouble and rousing up the problems in the town. It’s dangerous... but you currently look none the worse for wear - apart from perhaps an emotional drain.”

Grugg nodded. He had managed to plough through, either through willful action or dumb luck, most of the criminals besieging the town from beneath the shadows. “Grugg won’t do it again.”

“The Captain will probably hush things over in this instance,” the Investigator shuffled her paper into the folder. “It will do you well not to appear as a loose cannon to the local populace, though. Your team is...” she turned to face the group, eyeing each of them, “Not the most subtle - neither through looks nor actions. You’ll have to be aware of your public image.”

“Isn’t that part of your role, Lady Investigator?” Gregor tilted his head and bared fangs in an odd display that perhaps was some form of a smile.

“I suppose,” she sighed before returning a stern gaze towards the Deputy. “But don’t make my life too difficult.”

“You really killed all those criminals?” Claudia tapped her fingertips against her coffee mug. “Not that I am advocating for the wanton murder of everyone that opposes us... but in a way, I am glad that the people who wanted to assassinate me are... *dead*.” The clothesmaker pulled a face, somewhat ashamed at the prospect.

“Grugg wanted to keep Claudia safe,” the Detective shrugged sheepishly. “And all Grugg friends. Grugg has been... having anger problems.”

“That makes sense,” Gregor nodded, putting his feet up at the table atop the paperwork. “You are something else when you are angry, ser Grugg. That time in the alley when you briefly lost control... it is tough on you emotionally, though?”

The cyclops slumped back into the chair and sighed. “Grugg doesn’t like losing control - likes happy times. Grugg is an angry *barbarian* in heart, though.”

‘We want to work on controlling the rage, turn it into an asset rather than a liability.’

“That would be a good idea,” Peony folded her arms across her chest. “Although you are more than strong enough for the usual roughhousing that Detective-work brings, some of the Nightshade bosses are... well, other than Blackjack; the Helpart bosses haven’t put up much of a fight. Do not expect that to be the case in Galeden - or beyond.”

‘You think our investigation will take us even further than that?’

“That is a fair assumption, Barthelemy. I think you probably have some idea of the scope that we are working with.”

‘Who knows how far the Great Ancients span through Mubet? We will need to ensure we find them all and make sure no Nightshade are nibbling their way to the skulls - for whatever purpose they serve.’

"We'll see what comes out of the woodwork during Frank's trial and go from there." The Investigator nodded and gathered up her things. "For now, I suggest you three... sorry, four, actually get some rest before the trial. That means no mass murder, getting stuck underground, uncovering some lost powers of ruin etc. Just live a little." She sighed and walked around to collect the declarations and forms in their various states.

"Sorry we are such a pain, Peony," Claudia smiled, pushing some of her red hair from her face as the tall gothic woman took her paperwork.

"You'll be even more of a pain if you die on my watch," the smile returned was cold but not unfriendly. The lingering page of Raulo's death still hung, pinned to the noticeboard.

"In terms of threats, it seems ser Grugg has gotten rid of most of Nightshade now." Gregor pointed at the names of the five lower bosses.

Frank - Arrested Awaiting Trial
Silverfang - Arrested
Don Kean - Deceased
Dogman - Arrested
Gravestone - Fled to Galeden

"It's a matter of miracle, almost." Peony scowled at the doodles on the Deputy's paperwork as she collected them. "My job here was not to bring Nightshade to their knees or-

*'About that. Who **are** you investigating Harlan's death for?'*

"Pshh." The Investigator attempted to handwave the question away. "I'm sorry, there's a client confidentially that still goes above your station." Peony bit her lip. "It's an acquaintance of your brother; that's as far as I'm willing to divulge. *And no trying to guess when I'm around!* If I let it slip, then they'll assign me halfway across the country on some other job."

The group watched as she returned to the table by the noticeboard and packed away all the documents. Grugg sat staring into his coffee; by now, it had gotten cold and wasn't as nice. Atonement might be lurking within, however.

"Alright, I am off - the Captain will probably want to speak to me. I imagine he will want to see all of you too, at some point," her eyes darted over to the cyclops. "Until then, please do not get into trouble."

"No promises," Gregor grinned.

With a sigh and a smile, the Investigator turned and left the safehouse - putting her wide-brimmed black hat back on as she entered the chill day outside. The muffled goodbye of Barry could be heard, and then there was silence.

"Well," Claudia stated, standing up from her chair. "I am going to have a bath, and then I will need some help to strip the shop of anything useful to bring here. Threads will definitely need to be sold if we will be travelling soon."

"I'll help if I can complain about it constantly," the ratman stated, closing his eyes and turning away from the clothesmaker.

"I wouldn't have it any other way. You still up for it, Grugg?"

The Detective turned away from his mug to smile at Claudia. "Grugg will help."

"Excellent," she stated as she left for the bathroom. "Exciting times we live in, huh?"

The room fell into silence as the clothesmaker went through the door to the stairwell and then the bathroom itself. After a few moments, Gregor stood from the dining table and moved over to the morose cyclops, sitting himself next to the Detective.

"You okay, ser Grugg?"

"No," the reply was stated sadly as he gave the ratman a glum smile.

Gregor licked his fangs and crossed his legs. "Maybe... it would help if you got rid of the hat thing?"

'I am still here, you know.'

The ratman glared up at the burgundy peaked hat, the tip of his tail waving in the air slowly.

"Bart is okay, is just Grugg."

"I can't pretend to be good at life advice," Gregor leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes. "It may surprise you to learn I am just as flawed and conflicted as you, ser Grugg. Contented souls don't seek out adventure and danger."

'That is poignant, Gregor.'

"I stole that phrase from a book, ser Hat," the ratman smiled, still with eyes closed. "A book that I stole. For most of my life, I have been a thief, and given how much I hate criminals, you can imagine the self-loathing I have been living with."

"Grugg didn't know." The cyclops frowned but looked down at his Deputy with concern rather than judgement.

"That's part of why I've stuck around. You are very accepting, ser Grugg. Despite the crimes I commit, they are benefiting the town as a whole - a net positive. Even if it's something as simple as taking food to feed you so that you have the strength for the day."

"What? Gregor didn't make tasty food?"

"I can't *cook*," the ratman shook his head as his red eyes opened to glare at the Detective. "The point is, even if I am a thief, you are a rage-filled monster, and Lady Clothesmaker is a murderer - we end up doing more good than bad. On the whole."

'He is right; just look at what we have achieved, even if by unconventional means.'

The three once again looked up at the noticeboard. Ridding a town of the Nightshade organisation was undoubtedly worth the petty crimes they had committed along the way. Hopefully, the authorities would see it the same way - the Captain had been quite accommodating, but if they were to be on the way to Galeden soon, they would have to hope the people in charge would see it the same way there.

“Oh, and ser Hat is power-hungry and will likely doom us all.”

‘That is fair.’

Grugg smiled, and pat the Deputy on the shoulder, shuffling the small ratman with each motion. “Thanks, Gregor. Grugg has much to learn.”

‘Well, we have a day at least to wind down and decompress, at the least.’

“I tell you what, ser Grugg - if it cheers you up, I think we should investigate the locked basement soon.” Gregor tapped his snout with a clawed finger. “Lady Investigator never got around to opening it, so that can be all for you.”

That did sound fun. But then again, Grugg would investigate anything to get his mind off his troubles. He felt better; both the coffee and the open talk with the usually reluctant ratman had taken some of the burdens from his mind. On the whole, his friends had been dangerously accepting of his killing spree the night before. As a cyclops, his moral compass on who was okay or not to murder was not as mature as the more civilised folk around him - but then again, those closest to him were not as straight-edged as he first thought.

The side door creaked as Claudia emerged from the stairwell, dressed in a yellow dress with a purple silk belt, as she dried her hair with a towel. “You’ve just been moping about in here? Go get ready, we need to eat, and I am fast running out of outfits that aren’t stained with Nightshade blood.”

Despite the smiles, she still had her weapon and glove on her side, just in case.