

## Chapter 81 - Revenge is Mine

“Who- It’s the Detective, *oh sh-*”

The end of the sentence was prematurely punctuated by the large fist of the cyclops colliding into the man’s face. With a dull crunch, he flew almost a dozen feet back, rolling into a heap into the nearby bushes. Grugg grabbed the female half-wolf before she could make a run back into the mine tunnel, throwing the criminal back into the woods across the clearing - the crack of wood against bone determined they would not be getting back any time soon.

The Detective paced over to the fake door of the mine entrance, holding onto the wooden frame and glaring down into the torch-lit corridor beyond. His breath came heavy, and not just because of the short sprint. Grugg closed his singular eye as he tried to will his heartbeat to be a little quieter in his ears.

*Second thoughts?*

“This is... wrong.” The cyclops shut the secret door slowly, then sat on the cold floor to lean against it.

*Which part of this? Not that I disagree or agree.*

Grugg felt terrible. Revenge would be so easy. So easy. Without the Nightshade criminal expecting him, he could pulp the tiny humanoids without breaking a sweat. All the way up to whoever Dogman was, just kill and maim until none were left standing. The town would be better off for it - it wasn’t solely a selfish act. But it was wrong. Criminals or not, the wholesale mass slaughter was not the answer.

But! The voice on his other shoulder tried to convince him that he should still go ahead. They tried to kill Claudia, after all. And what if they heard about the Guard raid coming soon - would some escape? Would they do any other terrible deeds if Grugg chose not to act?

He prided himself on his ability to hold back his rage - but it was part of him, no matter how much he tried to hide away from it. What was one last indulgence? Let everything turn red once more before becoming a Detective officially and having to abide by more human rules and social norms. He dug his fingers through the dirt on the floor, clenching his fists.

*I understand. You want to stop them, and what’s in your blood is telling you that you need to eradicate the problem in the way you do best. But your heart also tells you it isn’t who you are; Grugg isn’t a violent person by nature.*

“Grugg has done lots of violent things,” the cyclops shrugged. “Maybe Grugg is violence.”

He looked up to the sky, a brief break in the clouds allowing him to see the tiny dots of shining stars looking back at him. It reminded him of being in the mountains. A single tear rolled down from his blue air as the night’s cold breeze brushed past him. “Grugg left tribe because Grugg anger.”

*Ah, I see.*

"All cyclops angry," the Detective clarified. "Grugg just couldn't control. Tribe said Grugg never be proper warrior with no control. Too reckless, make too much trouble."

*So you took a life of solitude to find peace and control over that side of you.*

Grugg nodded, folding his arms to rest his chin on his raised knees. "Never be warrior tribe be proud of."

*Have you heard of the barbarian tribes from Okra, South of Mubet? They are warriors, but they use their unbridled rage to fight. Sure, they are a bit more reckless than a trained fighter, but they are hardy and capable.*

"You think Grugg a barbarian?" He pouted at the idea; it sounded more like a negative title.

*I think you are a fine Detective. It's up to you to decide what you are; you can't fight your nature - but if you own what you have, you can mould it into something you can find peace with. This is coming from a talking hat.*

Grugg smiled and considered this. The wizard had taken to his new life without too much arguing - sure, Bart didn't have much choice... but then did Grugg have much choice with the anger that burned deep inside him on occasion?

*Whatever you decide to do - tonight or in the future - I will still be your friend and support you.*

The cyclops stood and dusted off his kilt. Detective Grugg the Barbarian. He wasn't fond of long names, but he did like that it gave a hint of his passion for arresting and punching people (not in that order). He turned back around to the doorway, trying to decide where this brief personal development was leading to.

*I'm unsure if we could block it, there could be other exits we don't know about.*

"Leaving them alone is bad idea too."

*Given this is another underground lair, we can assume a Great Ancient is buried below. Plus, Dogman is down there.*

"Lots of criminals." Grugg ran his tongue across his teeth. Claudia would probably not want him to put himself in danger over her. Peony would definitely be annoyed that he jumped ahead of the Guard to paste all the criminals. Gregor might just be jealous that he wasn't invited. Bart was down for anything...

But what did he want? To protect his friends, get rid of the criminals plaguing the town, and find clues for Harlan's murder. He clucked his tongue and held his chin in thought. The part of him that had been... domesticated by the town wanted to return to bed, have his day of rest and let the Guard do some heavy lifting for a change. The part of him that was an ambitious, if inexperienced, Detective wanted to search and arrest all the criminals right in front of him.

The cyclops that he was, at the base level, knew that his friends were Udok. That meant blood spilt was met with blood spilt. Any threat to the found family was dealt with extreme prejudice. Maybe he should have mentioned that before they all signed up. As the strongest, he had first dibs on any matters concerning the security and grudges of the Udok. The Dogman gang had almost killed Claudia and wounded Gregor. There was a chance they would try again if not stopped.

There was a moment of clarity within the Detective. He was duty-bound to come here; it wasn't a selfish act of immature anger - he was sworn by blood to be his true self, to allow the rage to burn out and cleanse his home of intruders. Where all this poetic prose was coming from, he wasn't sure. The lump of apprehension in his stomach faded away as he cracked his knuckles.

*Mind made up? After what they did to Claudia... and at the lumber yard... we won't be safe with them running free.*

Grugg nodded. He wouldn't forgive himself if they left now and the Nightshade hurt someone else. "Sometimes, good guys can be bad guys."

*Waters are muddy when it comes to this kind of thing.*

The cyclops unslung Thud and laid it on the ground before the door. "Thud doesn't need to see this."

*I will save most of my mana to heal you unless you need other support. When you are ready, give me the signal, and I'll pop the spell scroll.*

"If Grugg goes all the way angry... Grugg can't remember."

*Just try and arrest Dogman, at the least, if things get out of control... I have some options.*

Grugg closed his eye and stood before the door with a big sigh. The packed-away ball of rage deep in his stomach started to roil. He fed it all the negative thoughts, all his friends hurt, the injustices, and those goats he could never catch. A snarl drew across his broad face as the rage built until, eventually, he accepted it, allowing it to flood his system like a wash of adrenaline.

The enraged cyclops roared angrily and gripped the faux door to the mines, ripping it from the hinges with short effort. The torchlight from within cast a glow highlighting the furrowed creases in Grugg's face.

*Oh, I guess that's the signal.*

The spell scroll attached to the Barbarian's belt burst into ash as a flicker of three coloured sheens passed over the cyclops. The thunder of heavy footsteps led the way as he rushed into the tunnel, eye aflame with blue as his face contorted in rage.

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Grugg blew bubbles along the surface of the bath. It had long gone cold, and his skin had wrinkled from the time he had spent soaking. He was unbelievably tired as if the water had drawn away all his emotions. Empty. The brief images of the night that emerged from his memories, like his toes at the other end of the bath, were both an ugly reminder of who he was.

With a long sigh, he sat up and then exited the bath. He stood on the wooden floor of the safehouse, dripping and bare. Despite the coolness of the water, his body still steamed - no doubt in part to the healing the wizard had plied him with. Indeed, inspecting his body, only a few claw marks remained - and thankfully in places he could easily hide with clothes.

“Let’s pretend never happened,” he murmured to the hat.

*Yes, I can accept that.*

Where Grugg had little memory, between flashes of crimson and the crunch of heavy impacts, he knew Bart had seen it all. For that, he was both ashamed and thankful. He stretched out his tired muscles, his knuckles and fingers sore to flex. It would have been easier for him to use Thud, but classically Udok grudges were settled with fists. Classically, cyclops’ had it wrong, Grugg considered.

He dried and clothed himself, opting to wear one of his comfortable shirts and shorts - it was to be a rest day, after all. With a last sigh, he pushed through and entered the main room of the safehouse. Dawn had not long broached the day, a gloomy overcast one, but enough to give the long room a soft light. He sat at the chairs opposite the suspect-board and gave it a blank stare.

Dogman wasn’t dead; he knew that much. Subdued might be the right word to use. In his rage, he couldn’t even see the humour in the boss not even being a wolfman. A brief smile crossed his face as his eye closed, feeling slightly warm and contented - maybe a short nap would be in order.

“Morning, ser Grugg,” the voice of Gregor startling him as the ratman stood at the doorway to the stairwell. “Couldn’t sleep?”

“Nope.”

“Coffee?”

“Yes please, Gregor.” Maybe it would put a bit of life back into him. “Gregor... you are always Gregor, yes?”

The ratman paused on the way to the kitchen, turning to see the wide, tired eye of the cyclops watching him. “Huh?”

‘I think what Grugg means, is that you are always unapologetically yourself, whatever that entails.’

Gregor swirled his tail in the air, considering the question. "Yes. It's what got me... shown out of my den. But that didn't stop me from being myself; it just meant my den was not for me." He turned again to go to the kitchen. "Now I have you guys."

"*Udok*," Grugg murmured to himself as he turned back to the investigation noticeboard.

*If the Nightshade are doing something terrible with these giant skulls, it might do well to have your full potential at our disposal. We can train it to be more controllable...*

The sound of footsteps halted the wizard from continuing, despite not being able to be heard by anyone else. There was a slight creak as the door to the stairwell opened, and Claudia came out. Wearing a silk robe, her hair a mess on one side, she yawned and smiled at the Detective.

"Morning Grugg." She went and sat at the dining table as the cyclops returned a guilty grin of his own, her head resting on her folded arms. "Sounds like Gregor is making coffee - perfect."

Barry opened, letting in more of the dim morning sunlight, along with the monochrome figure of Lady Valoth.

"Ah, morning Grugg, you look terrible." She smiled, slight concern on her face.

"Justice never sleeps," Grugg replied, a more natural smile briefly returning.