

Chapter 88 - Unbreakab- oops

“Grugg forgives you?” The cyclops shrugged at the cryptic writing above the door.

“Nope,” Gregor shook his head, “if we start talking to walls now, then I’m calling it quits.”

Grugg rubbed his chin. If they could go a day without some mystery or danger, it would be a miracle. This one was perhaps low on the priority list; they could surely just ask Patson later on who had the safehouse before them - it would most likely be that person or group that made the apologetic scrawling.

‘Do you know who wrote that? Who was here before us?’

“Those Who Were Here Before You, I Know Them As Weak Fighters. Nothing Further Was To Be Gained From Learning Their Names. They Were Inconsequential.”

‘Okay, I think we get it. A problem for a different day?’

The other two nodded in agreement and headed back up the stone steps into the ruined stairwell. Grugg sheepishly stepped over the pile of split planks he had moved to the side and looked up at the landing to the next floor - the top two stairs hanging on but looking rather lonely. Maybe he could just boost the others up to their rooms, and he would sleep downstairs.

“So, that was quite the noise - but neither of you seems particularly dead,” Claudia brushed her red hair from her face as they entered the main room, “what happened?”

“Basement has a talking training dummy,” Gregor waved her off as he looked for his black cloak. “Also, we no longer have any stairs.”

“Grugg’s fault,” the cyclops said, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Somehow, I’m neither shocked nor disappointed. It’s not the worst thing that’s happened to us... and a talking training dummy?”

‘It is very intense. We think you’d find it helpful for practice too. Gregor is going to get some supplies.’

“If you have any requests, Lady Clothesmaker?” The ratman wrapped his cloak around himself.

“Ah, just don’t get caught?” She shrugged and closed her luggage case.

“No promises,” he grinned and left the building, ignoring the goodbyes of Barry as he went.

“Grugg going to get changed and go fight, want to do same?” The cyclops grinned, eager to shred the suit from his body and punch the dummy more.

“Sure, sounds fun. Make sure you take the suit off nicely - you’ll need it for the trial, and you’ve already gotten it dusty.” She smiled despite the stern tone in her voice.

“Okay, meet downstairs!” Grugg bounded off to the washroom. Inside, he stripped down to just his kilt, even removing his boots. Everything was put in a neat pile - or at least neat enough, he considered. There wasn't a great deal of space in the basement, so Thud would have to stay put and guard the upstairs. His bare feet made heavy pats against the stone steps as he returned to the basement.

“The Angry Meat Man Returns.”

“Hi,” Grugg waved, stretching his arms and flexing side to side to limber up.

A short minute later, soft footsteps descended down the stone steps as Claudia entered the room. She had removed her dress and decided to wear a long grey sleeveless shirt over black shorts in addition to her leather bracers and shirt. The Storm and the reg glove were affixed on her belt, and she carried her wooden shield in her off-hand.

“No dress?” Grugg smiled, folding his arms across his broad chest.

“It'll soon warm up down here once we are fighting,” she glanced with furrowed brow at the training dummy looking towards her, “and it turns out dresses aren't especially good to fight in.”

“Miss Ollen, It Is A Pleasure To Meet You.”

“Uh...” Grugg pulled a face.

‘You know who Claudia is? But not us?’

“You Are But Weaklings. Miss Ollen Is Also Weak, But Bren Ollen Was My Creator?”

“My... my mother made you?” Claudia paled, her eyes trying to find some answer along the seams of the padded dummy.

“Not Alone, But In Part, I Am Her Child Too... Sister.”

“Nooope.” Claudia rubbed her temples and closed her eyes. “I said I didn't want to come down here or know about it. Now look,” she turned to Grugg, “I have a weird inanimate sibling.”

“Much Stronger Than You, Too. Mother Would Be Proud. Of Me.”

Claudia narrowed her eyes at the dummy and slowly slipped the red glove onto her hand.

“Maybe Claudia like to go first?” Grugg said hesitantly as he stepped backwards towards the door.

The clothesmaker raised her shield as the large needle lifted into the air, pointing towards the dummy, the thin blue thread dangling behind it. In return, the training assistant changed into a fighting stance, readying for the attack.

“Just To Let You Know, I Won’t Go Easy On You Just Because You Are Family.” The words came out stilted without the nuance of proper tonal inflexion - just a sequence of words used to meet the required sentiment.

Claudia growled as her hand flung forward, the needle darting straight through the air along with it. As the dummy raised a hand glowing blue to block it, she changed the direction last second, swirling around in a loop to strike the back of her target.

The dummy rolled to the side just before it struck, The Storm swirling into empty air as Claudia twirled it in a spiral trying to chase down the dummy now on the back foot. Sparks flew up from the floor as the unliving doll jumped over a low sweep of the weapon before it stamped down on the blue thread. Unable to travel further, The Storm swung upwards on the taut string like an upside-down pendulum, with the padded hand of the dummy deftly catching it. The clothesmaker struggled against it but could not dislodge the weapon.

“I Am The Victor. Thank You, Sister. Let Me Fight The Big Meat Now.”

“Haha, meat,” Grugg grinned, patting Claudia gently on the shoulder as she seethed - the needle released and returned to her.

‘Is it okay if I join, or?’

“Just Meat, For Now, Talky Hat.”

Grugg once again limbered up, rolling his shoulders and flexing his fingers before raising his fists in challenge.

See if you can tap into your anger, but don’t go all the way.

The dummy stood in a fencing stance and raised a hand up, a stubby finger gesturing for the cyclops to engage.

With a roar, Grugg launched at the trainer, swinging his punches one after another, with most of them being blocked or dodged with little effort from the dummy. A small point of glowing ember burned inside of him - that familiar roiling of anger that slowly grew with every ineffective punch. He didn’t quell it like usual but tried to control it. Instead of a burning flood of rage, he tried to force it into shape - like a blacksmith forging steel.

Warmth spread through his arms as he felt sweat run down his back - but it was different than the wizard’s healing. It was a searing feeling, not quite a pain, but a discomfort that just made him want to hit faster, hit harder. An uppercut struck the dummy, sending the smaller figure sliding up against the wall - as it dodged the follow-up, Grugg struck the wall with his fist instead. A crack ran up the large stone as a small spray of dust crumbled to the floor.

“Oh, That’s Not Meant To-” The dummy rolled to the floor to escape the increasing barrage of punches thrown by the cyclops.

Okay buddy, calm it down - stay with me here.

The blazing inferno of blue in Grugg's singular eye simmered into a calm glow, and he relented on his assault, his haggard breathing the only sound for a brief few seconds as the trainer got back to its feet.

"At Least You Have Some Potential. Try Not To Destroy My Home, Please."

"Sorry," Grugg sighed sheepishly. "Sometimes Grugg get too worked up."

"It's... pretty intimidating to behold," Claudia added, standing in the corner with wide eyes. "You're like a different person almost. Cyclops-person?"

"Compared To Sister And Furbag, You May Be The Closest To Beating Me." The dummy moved back into the middle of the room and dusted itself down. "Where Is Furbag?"

"Just acquiring some... oh, he wouldn't steal from Eleanor, would he?" Claudia folded her arms.

'Not if he wanted to come home with all his limbs attached. I saw what was protecting the shop; it's probably the most secure place in town, after Frank's cell, I hope.'

"Even though some naughty shadow was in there that one time?" Grugg wiped the rock dust from his knuckles, the wizard already slowly healing the scrapes.

'I would like to find the answer to that one day - perhaps we have already passed whatever tribulation that entailed.'

"Yes," Grugg nodded, understanding some of the words.

"Do You Usually Fight Unarmed, Meat Man?"

"Grugg has a club called Thud. Bart helps too with magic." He pointed to the hat.

"Retrieve Your Paltry Weapon Whilst I Skirmish With Sister Again."

The cyclops shrugged in acceptance and smiled at Claudia as he headed for the stairs.

"Really unnerving to be called that," she murmured under her breath as The Storm rose into the air again in preparation.

Grugg hopped up the stone stairs back into the bathroom. Thud had done an exemplary job of guarding his suit, it seemed. *This was fun*. He wished they had found the fighting dummy on the first day here - they could have practised so much and been a lot stronger for their battles.

He staggered back down the stairs with the club in hand to find Claudia panting, a gash running down her right arm, The Storm hanging in the air loosely beside her.

"A Nice Idea, But Risky - You Need More Practice, Sister."

The Detective moved over to her and placed his hand softly on her shoulder.

'Healing Pulse'

"Thanks, Bart," she smiled, with a darted glare at the dummy.

"Okay Meat Man, I Want You To Show Me How Hard You Can Hit."

Grugg shrugged and moved over to the trainer, who assumed a defensive position, a blue sheen covering their body. The cyclops drew back Thud to the side like a bat and swung hard, striking the dummy, who slid a dozen feet backwards, a flare of blue briefly lighting the underground chamber.

"No, Incorrect. You Must Use Your Rage." The stuffed figure moved back to position and raised its defences once more.

With a sigh, Grugg closed his eye and focused within. That spark of white-hot energy within him sparked up and began to grow like wildfire. Soon his limbs burned with the searing heat of his rage. His eye opened, a flickering inferno of blue fire cascading forth. This second swing of Thud was faster, almost whistling as it whipped through the air to strike the prepared trainer.

A crackle of magical energy filled the air, a burnt smell accompanying the weighty thump as the dummy struck the back wall with a sickening crunch. It flopped to the floor, limply, as all the anger drained from the cyclops.

'Oh no, I suppose that's what happens when you try and egg people on too much.'

Claudia ran over to the prone dummy and gave it a once over, concern painted over her face. "Part of it has come loose... I could maybe fix it. Bart come and have a look?"

With Grugg's hand placed on the padded figure, the drawn-on face seemed somehow sadder, as the wizard read into the magic details of its construction.

'My guess is that all of the defensive capabilities were focused on the front, and it was hitting the wall undefended, so suddenly knocked something loose. If you can get it physically repaired... then I should be able to jump-start it. I'm not one for Golemancy, but most of the hard work is already done.'

Grugg just sat glumly on the floor.

"This why Grugg never had toys as child," he pouted.