

Chapter 93 - Trial of Patience

Grugg's feet itched. It was partly due to the magic that Bart was pumping through his arm and into the building, which left aftershocks of tingling throughout his body. The other part was because everyone was being so quiet and still listening to the people at the front, and he was getting impatient.

At first, he had been pretty engaged and interested - Lady Valoth had stood and said things, and she looked every part as collected and professional as a Prosecutor could. That said, Grugg would probably be convinced of anything if the gothic barbarian told him to. Perhaps it was a good thing she was on the good side. Or at least what classed as good.

He remembered her words before they left the cafe that morning - 'The difference between a *criminal* investigator and a criminal *investigator* is how effective you are at both things.' However, he had nodded along, pretty content to agree while filling his maw with the tasty meal - now that in the cold light of day, he couldn't remember which inflected part was good and which was terrible. Maybe they were both inflected - *criminal investigator*. Now her voice in his head was all over the place.

Then the Defence had their turn to make a case - or whatever a trial actually encompassed. The man, with a rather unfortunate name of Roger Toadly, had stood and given a less convincing slant on the events that had transpired. Grugg only vaguely understood the purpose of what was going on. In the tribe, such arguments were usually settled with physical violence or at least a lot of shouting. It was difficult enough not to be able to laugh at the name of the Defence, so understanding the nuance of the working parts of the trial was beyond him.

In between spells, Bart would try to fill him in on details. Even if Frank were guilty beyond a doubt, there would be two sides to try and explain how he was guilty or reasons why they shouldn't count, and he instead be exonerated. Grugg didn't understand the last word, but he liked to imagine it involved putting the hapless Nightshade boss in a cannon and shooting him out into the woods to be a problem for the wilderness. Although... he himself had been that until about two weeks ago.

Once more, he found himself wondering at the speed at which he was now integrated into society. Here he was, standing in a courtroom for the trial of a criminal he caught as he is now an officially licensed Detective. He was licensed by the Crown, in fact. He barely had a passing knowledge of the Crown, and now it paid him to punch bad guys. It should be paying him - he wasn't sure they had their first bag of gold in yet—something to talk to Peony about later.

Odd, I've never sat in a trial before. It is a lot more boring than I had expected - and they used to call me a turtle.

Grugg smiled to himself; a turtle with a little wizard hat on would be pretty amusing, *and* slow.

I've done what I can. It is difficult with no runes to anchor to in the building to set up like Eleanor's shop was. We will know if the perimeter is breached or if any magic tries to breach

through into the chamber in secret. Nothing that can prevent it or do damage just in case a Guard pops through or something - we wouldn't want to start a riot by ourselves.

The cyclops looked around the room until his eye locked with those of Frank. Even more dishevelled than when they had brawled in the tavern, his eyes burned with anger at the Detective. Grugg resisted the urge to smile at the man. It probably wouldn't do well to be seen as friendly with the accused; he was already catching enough glances and glares from the horde of onlookers. In fairness, he stood out - both physically and in reputation.

Instead, he looked back up to Claudia. She was paying attention to the trial but had her chin in her palms, having the decency at least to look as bored as he felt. Her eyes caught his, and she gave a brief smile before focusing on the trial once more. It was hard to pick a favourite friend in his Udok, but he wondered why it was Claudia.

I wonder why there was no need to call you as a witness. Maybe there will still be? Perhaps it is more of a show trial; rather than determining guilt, they are just putting the screws on Nightshade publicly.

This jolted Grugg awake. His mouth dried instantly at the thought of having to stand up in front of all these people and give answers to questions. He would surely make a mess and embarrass himself. It wasn't a situation he could punch or run from. Just scores of faces judging his every word, on him being a big, dumb cyclops. He slowly exhaled to stop the nervous sweat from building.

He was not paying enough attention to know how far into the trial they were, how things were progressing, or even what the current stage was. While this had been penned as a big, momentous day, he found himself partly wishing he was not here. Not that he didn't want to see Frank face justice; he just wanted it to be done with fewer words.

Grugg's mind started wandering again. It began on the day that he had met the wizard. Well, murdered-by-accident. Funny how so much could change in such a brief, chance encounter. But then, that had been most of his Detective career too. Just blindly running into trouble and finding things that just so happened to be lying wherever his heavy boots had ended up.

He had found friends who had joined him; why? Sure, he was charismatic and really strong, but there must be something else guiding them together. Harlan and Krom adventured together, Claudia's mother, in part, made the training dummy, and Eleanor used to know Bart from his youth. It was all interestingly connected - like threads between stars.

Maybe he really was becoming a Detective, he mused, totally ignoring whatever droning was going on in the trial. Were the lives of people always so intertwined, and it was just his studious eye that brought them out? Or were their fates somehow conjoined, a stew of parts that belonged to each other at some point? Like a whole-goat-stew. He had made one once, on the rarest occasion where he had managed to catch one of the elusive beasts.

If only he were proficient like *Goreblaster*. He liked to think he would be friends with the muscled hero and likened their relationship with Percy as similar to his and Bart's. Imagine living that constant power fantasy of always coming out on top of whatever giant problem life

threw at you. That would surely be bliss. No judgements, just the adoration of fans as you quelled yet another dangerous adventure. Maybe not, though.

Sometimes a little bit of struggle kept you grounded. Grugg could make mincemeat of most human-sized enemies, but there had been times when his life was on the line, and it kept you humble. Both times he had been saved by his friends, and in turn, he had saved them. He had wished there had been more time to do things with Peony, but now that she had eaten the Udok cake, there would be no excuse once this tedious trial was over.

He gave the room another once over. The least he could do if not paying attention would be to keep watch. Most of the Guard looked just as bored as he was too, or perhaps they were meant to be so stoic. There was an attempt to scour the crowd for any potentially suspicious people, but none of them stood out. He supposed that there would be no way of telling if any were Blackjack anyway unless the Detect Magic scanner out front could pick him up.

Grugg caught a yawn before it could escape. He was pretty sure he had been here, propping up this wall, for hours - if not days. Maybe this was his life now. The clouds from the mountains had seen their opportunity to roll over, and the small windows near the top of the courthouse just revealed dark grey. He realised at this point that the circular window they saw at the front didn't lead all the way through - a plain wooden wall with a mountain shape painted upon it took its place. How strange - either magic or just some crafty building work.

Could he sleep whilst standing? Perhaps, but it would definitely be noticed - especially by the slight elderly closest to him who would not stop giving him the side-eye. He would find that suspicious, but anyone that chose a tiny, frail human as a disguise wasn't much of a threat. Unless that is what they wanted him to think. He narrowed his eye at the lady, who shuffled slowly to the side away from him.

Keep it together, Grugg. I know that this is a bit much standing around for you, but we are at least halfway, maybe near the end, if they are indeed not calling witnesses.

The Detective internally screamed. If this was halfway, then he hoped that they had a break-time so that he could stick his boot through something or wind up Gregor. Just as he frustratedly twitched in place, he caught the eye of the Captain, who gave him the briefest dry smile and a wink before he turned back to the proceedings. It made some sense to Grugg, but the wizard helped clarify the situation, just in case.

Ah, part of me thinks that this is some punishment from the Captain. For our little midnight excursion. Where we murdered a ton of people, Wolf-people, mostly, but some were ordinary people. For what passed as normal anyway, on the Nightshade criminal to weird werewolf scale. Actually, it is pretty weird only having one-way conversations, isn't it?

His eye glazed over. This was definitely some kind of personal hell, some penance for his rampage - even if not planned by the Captain, it was surely life dealing him the cards he deserved. That was how cards worked, right? They weren't meant to catch fire or do weird magic things like Blackjack's cards did. He really didn't like that Nightshade boss.

What was the point of hiding and disguising all the time? If he was as hardy as the information Peony gave them, then why wasn't he more brazen and inventive with his

methods? Cards seemed dumb when you could transform yourself into anything, like a goat or...

Grugg jumped as a small ping came from his pocket. He nervously dug out the lit Message Stone as every eye in the room turned to him, immediately sweating and trying to murmur out apologies.

[aa.....]

A wide, humourless grin panned across his mouth as he mouthed 'sorry' to Lady Valoth. The presence of Captain Wanu sitting nearby gave him a stern scowl as the Judge shook her head.

Grugg, I think there's-

The double doors exploded inwards, spaying the back half of the room with dust and splintered shards. A silhouetted figure clambered into the entrance from the darkness of light rain behind.

As a muscled figure at least head taller than even Grugg clambered through the entrance on four spindly legs, their red skin picked up the flickering torchlight with their yellow eyes glowing through the cloud of debris obscuring their entrance.

Robed figures shouted and surged past this monstrosity into the courthouse; the beast raised a large lobster claw, a round object flung from it, bouncing down the middle walkway.

Screams and panic filled the panic, as the muted sounds of clanking armour and yells fell beneath the pounding of the Detective's heartbeat as his eye focused on the thrown object.

As it rolled to a stop, a cold, sickening feeling sunk through Grugg like lead, his grip on Thud tightening.

It was Patson's bloodied head.