

## Chapter 52 - Picked Up

Grugg's tongue grew dry, and his attempt to speak faltered, getting stuck on the lump of now very awkward talking muscle in his mouth.

"Were you here for a reason, Detective, or were you just here to make eyes at me?" There was zero mirth in the man's tone as his expression grew exasperated with the presence of the cyclops.

'Who are you, really?'

Not-Edward paused, caught slightly off guard by the hollow voice that rang out from where the cyclops was sitting. His lips quivered as his brow narrowed in obstinate confusion. "Who said that? Just what are you playing at, Detective?"

There was a comfort to be found in the wavering confidence of the alleged imposter, and Grugg found it hard to suppress a relaxed grin. The wizard knew better than him and could take charge of the heavy mental lifting for a bit. Even though the cooling panic tired him further, the new twist in the conversation piqued his interest far too much to zone out.

'I know that you are not Edward.'

"Preposterous," he blustered, "I don't know who you think you are, but this is getting-"

'I am Barthélemy Béraud, brother of Harlan. And you are not his assistant.'

The man froze in place, his mouth gawking slightly despite his best attempts to maintain composure. Then, gripping the table tightly, he leant forward with raised eyebrows. "You are supposed to be dead... but your ghost remains?"

'It seems I have unfinished business in the mortal plane - namely, tracking down some murderers.'

"Oh," the man faltered, and now his voice did not have the gruff elderly slant to it. "Perhaps I should give you my card then and introduce myself." Reaching into his suit jacket, he retrieved two small rectangles and placed them in the middle of the table.

Grugg looked down at the white cards with weird shapes and pictures on them.

*Huh, an Ace of Hearts and Ten of- No! Grugg don't-*

A bright flash of light blinded the Detective, and a concussive blast of white noise rang in his ears. Clutching at his face, the cyclops was briefly aware of a moving chair and the door to the room swinging open, just based on the displacement of air.

*That was Blackjack!*

Grugg stumbled up to his feet as his vision slowly returned, at first grey blobby shapes, before the colour and detail seeped back into place. The chair opposite was indeed empty, and the book that had been laid open was gone too. He gazed around the library at the now

open door, blinking to get it all into focus. So many shelves full of thousands of books that he had trouble seeing clearly, but no obvious movement of the escapee.

*Get to the front, and see if the guy at the desk saw anything.*

With clumsy footing, the cyclops stomped through the passageways between the shelves, only briefly close to overturning a few as he barrelled past. It was perhaps a blessing that the library was reasonably quiet, and no civilians were perusing the dusty tomes to get run down by the hulking mass of the Detective. Grugg teetered as he took a sharp turn into the small library front lobby.

“Everything okay, Detective?” the young man paled at the reckless approach of the cyclops, and had already begun sweating as he sat clasping a book with a red cover.

“Seen man leave just now?” Grugg panted out, the short sprint not mixing well with his exhaustion.

“No sir, nobody in or out since you came in. Is there a problem?”

“Is a criminal here,” the cyclops turned back to the interior of the library. With his height, there were a few shelves he could see over, and he waited to see if any shapes were moving around within.

*Perhaps he might be trying to bait us out of the building whilst he hides inside.*

The Detective stepped amongst the rows of shelves, carefully and slowly placing his heavy boots down as he watched for any movement. About a third of the way through the cluttered building, Grugg stopped and held his breath. A headache had begun pulsing with his heartbeat, and his eye felt strained and tired. Closing it, he tried to focus on his surroundings.

*Something is feeling off here. Here, let me...*

The pulse of white light from the Moonchaser Orb flowed through the stacked rows of books, causing Grugg to wince from the brightness as he opened his eye. Around a handful of tome-shaped outlines sprung up at various points in the library - but none moving, and nothing person-shaped. Then, some footsteps, slight at first but approaching from his left. Propelled forward in an attempt to escape his current discomfort, the cyclops launched himself forward to intercept the figure.

“No running in the- oh, Detective, everything okay?” The surprise was written on the young man’s face as he stood, also intending to intercept the rampant Grugg.

“Huh.”

*Front desk, now!*

Grugg spun on the spot and rushed back, altogether too warm and frustrated. He might just snap Blackjack in half when found for the slight relief it might give.

"No running, I said!" the young man's voice faded behind him, not entirely confident enough to chastise the large investigator to his face.

Turning the corner, he stopped dead in his tracks to see the front desk now sat empty. Not entirely unsurprising given the young man had been inside the library - but how had he managed to sneak past the cyclops discerning eye? Grugg approached the desk and looked down; a small rectangular card sat in the middle. With his stubby fingers, he picked it up and showed it to the wizard.

*Joker card.*

"Blackjack is shape-changer?"

*It seems that way. Did you notice his voice changed before he escaped? I guess we know what it is like to be on the wrong end of the Light rune now.*

Grugg grunted and pushed the library's front door open, stepping into the cool air. Being away from the stuffy confines of the book-laden building dulled his aches, if only slightly. A gaze up and down the street proved fruitless - not only was it almost devoid of foot traffic, but if the Nightshade boss had turned into one of the random townspeople, there would be no way of knowing. The Detective took small pride in that either it was personal growth or perhaps just his exhaustion that stopped him from shaking down the nearest person with suspicious intent.

*I wonder why they were pretending to be Edward? It was confusing at first, as they had it pretty close. But, Edward was a half-elf that had the pointed ears from his mother's side. He often wore headwear that obscured them; he always complained about sensitive hearing - and my brother's experiments were often loud.*

With a sigh, the cyclops pinched the bridge of his nose. He wanted to go back to the safe house and crawl back into bed, but even the prospect of trying to squeeze through the doorways and into the tiny bedroom felt like a hurdle too far. And now he also had to worry about someone who could turn into other people. How was he supposed to... "Hmm."

*Are you thinking what I am thinking, Grugg? Assuming that you aren't thinking about goats.*

"Tall Lady could change too."

*We should visit our competitors sometime since they have been keeping tabs on us; they shouldn't be hard to find. I am aware of several ways the illusion could be done, but we can pick their brains. Let me see that card again.*

Grugg raised the Joker card so that the wizard could see it, forgetting that he still had it clasped in his meaty mitts after leaving the library. "Is card dangerous too?"

*I can't trace any magic from the card itself; however, I am trying to see if there is any residual energy left by the suspect. Tuck it into the band of the hat for now; I will try to absorb what I can as we move.*

The Detective did so, slotting it facing the burgundy peak of the wizard's hat. "Bart didn't tell he could use Orb now." Grugg stretched out his back with a dull click and began absent-mindedly walking towards somewhere he could get some food.

*It's a bit like the Light rune. Now that Thud is back with us, I've been able to probe into the workings of the activation magic and set it off just as you can. The earring that Eleanor gave us has really-*

Grugg hand-waved away the explanation. "Can Bart fix headache?" It was a selfish request, but if he was going to survive the rest of the day without his patience withering away, he needed a bit of reprieve.

*I can dull the pain, but I can't give you any energy. Not yet, anyway...*

The Detective stopped and didn't respond straight away as two bearded men walked past in front of him. He gave them a nod and a grin even if he didn't feel it, and they responded politely in kind. Of course, it would do him well to try and not look crazy talking to himself, but the fact that he was stemming his behaviours away came as a slight surprise to him.

*Get some food and drink; I will focus on healing for a bit. Then let's try and keep it a bit easier for the day, huh? Maybe we could check in with the Captain and then head home for an early night?*

Grugg nodded and started heading towards where he thought he remembered the butchers to be. They could update the Captain on their recent findings, although he wasn't sure if telling the half-orc about their intention to delve into the dungeon under the town was a good idea. Wanu might try and stop them, or there might be ears in the headquarters that would overhear and make their attempt more difficult.

His thoughts drifted to the whole plans for their apparent next adventure. Entering a dungeon and fighting off monsters and devious traps was definitely something he had heard in tales from his elders, although the stories were few and far between. Cyclopean adventurers were uncommon, but there were tales of the occasional one or two that had stuck in the tribal folklore. The one Grugg remembered the most was of Hamfist.

Depending on who was telling the story, Hamfist was either a hero of the old times or was still knocking about in the present day. A particularly large, domineering, and totally mischievous figure, even by mountainfolk standards. Not to be outdone by the smallfolk, Hamfist had decided to make his own adventuring party comprised solely of those descended from the mountain. Ogres, trolls, yeti, and even a giant were said to be a part of his retinue at one point or another - if the tales are to be believed.

With their prodigious size and strength, there were many obstacles that were able to just power through with brute force. As a result, the Lair of Evil Wood became nothing more than charred splinters; the Forbidden Mines caved in without having to be breached; and the Hall of Sleepless Dead was quickly put to rest (all over the walls).

The tales never covered the headaches, injury recoveries, or awkward, miserable social encounters that adventuring apparently *actually* consisted of. As far as Grugg knew, he

should be able to just stomp through the dungeon, and everything should be dust beneath his heavy boots. But, with how the last week had been, it had put doubt in his mind that things would be that easy.

“Thanks, Karl,” he muttered to the butcher, placing the requested coin on the polished counter with a nod. Then, taking a bite of the tough meat, he stepped back out into the overcast day, a jug of cool water in his other hand. Despite the breeze, he felt warm inside - undoubtedly due to the wizard's efforts.

With a slightly content sigh, he trudged onwards to the Guard headquarters, wondering if one day there would be stories told to cyclops children about *Grugg, the Detective*.