

## Chapter 46 - Pride Begets Fall

Grugg stepped back, momentarily in shock. He had expected the man to crumple under his attack, but instead, the impact had left the Nightshade spy unphased. This was all the opportunity the man needed to launch his counterattack, and a flurry of blows caught the cyclops in the stomach and torso before he could bring his arm up to block. These attacks had more weight behind them.

*If you get the chance to grab him - do so.*

The Detective dropped the Message stone and gripped his club with both hands, launching a heavy backhanded swing towards the assailant. Fixion jumped backwards and then rolled to the side from the follow-up kick - both attacks hitting nothing but air. Grugg grunted out in frustration as the spy kept just outside his reach.

"Try hitting him, ser Grugg," Gregor called out from the sidelines, idly tapping his pencil against the notepad.

Grugg leapt at the man, swinging Thud left and right, following up the attacks as he burned his energy into flailing his club around as quickly as possible. Any joy he felt when the occasional swing connected was immediately dampened as Fixion was just blocking the immense force of the weapon with his bare arms.

**"Strength."** The spy's voice activating another rune coincided with more of the runic imprints on his arm flaring a bright green light.

*Quick, move back - defence!*

But Thud was already in mid-swing, aimed at the side of Fixion. Grugg tried to pull it back into a feint, expecting the spy to deflect the blow - but instead, the man caught the attack. Pulling on the club, the Detective lurched forwards unexpectedly, straight into a left hook into his stomach. This time pain now flared up his torso as he caught nausea rising in his throat.

Attempt to grab out at the man, Fixion weaved to the side and lashed out with his fist into the forearm of the cyclops - a numb shock reverberating up Grugg's arm. Even before the Detective could bring his club to bear for a counter attack the spy was circling him with unexpected speed, the occasional punch and jab thrown out towards his target like a sparring boxer. Wherever the fist struck, a dull shock of pain burst forth.

Thud swung in and was just deflected, the dull thunk of metal against hardened skin the only result. For every missed or defended swing, Grugg would receive twice as many punches in return. Whilst each of the hits were not powerful on their own, the damage was beginning to mount up under the repeated assault. The Nightshade officer caught the next side swipe with the mighty club. Grugg tried to pull Thud back, but Fixion retained his unnaturally strong hold on it, a further strike to his torso the only reward for the cyclops.

Grugg dropped to his knees, slightly winded from this blow, as he looked into the glowing green eyes of the man possessed by runic power. Fixion struck the cyclops in the side of his head, causing stars to flare up in his vision before the spy grabbed onto Grugg's neck in an

attempt to choke him. Even with the undisputed runic strength of the fighter, his hand was not broad enough to properly wrap around the Detective's throat - but was still able to cause debilitating pain.

"Look me in the eyes while I snuff you out, Detective," Fixion spat, a twisted grin forming on his face.

The cyclops grabbed at the arm, attempting to wring the life out of him. Why did people keep trying this? It was very unfun. Despite Grugg's natural strength, he didn't seem to be able to budge the arm - whatever weird runic magic used had turned the man into an unmovable mountain. A strange pulse of energy was filling his body, the feeling of arcs of energy flickering across his muscles and bone down his left arm. But this didn't feel like the last time he was losing consciousness; this felt like when Bart-

### **Neutralise.**

And then, what was unmoveable started to slowly yield. The clasped hand moved gradually off of Grugg's neck, and as he regained his footing, he found now he was more in control of the power struggle.

*Sorry, I could only lessen the effects of his runes - not fully revert them.*

Grugg pushed Fixion back, wrenching Thud back from his grasp as the man looked confused. The cyclops took the opportunity to swing out with the reclaimed club, which the spy tried to block. A clang as the steel cap connected with its intended target, sending Fixion stumbling backwards. Uninjured still, but unable to fully absorb the strong attacks.

"What did you do?" he cried out as he rolled to avoid another swing, the club sending up sparks as it scraped against the stone floor en route to where he had stood.

"Grugg just won some goat meat." He raised Thud above his head with both hands.

### **Light.**

The radiant bright daylight from the rune flared across the surroundings, and the blinded Fixion braced for impact. However, instead of smashing down on the expecting spy, Grugg instead stepped forward and tripped the man. Fixion spawled to the floor unexpectedly, and as his vision slowly cleared, he found himself pinned by the cyclops - who now sat atop his chest.

"Ser Grugg, you should really give some warning before that," Gregor rubbed his blinded eyes.

"Wasn't Grugg - Bart did it," the cyclops grinned. Fixion squirmed beneath him, unable to get any purchase to leverage the large Detective off of him.

"I should have guessed," the ratman scowled at the hat as he hopped off his seat and walked over to the pair. He stowed away his notepad and brought out a pair of shackles.

"Fixion said the no-magic cuffs don't work on him."

“You could always just break ser Fixion’s legs; that should work,” Gregor shrugged.

Grugg looked down at the prone man. “Fixion have opinion?”

“N-no, please don’t - the runes only last so long and then I’ll be weak again.” Sweat ran down his brow as his previously glowing eyes dimmed.

*He is telling the truth, although I cannot tell how many rune spells he has left.*

The Detective sat for a minute as his Deputy put the shackles around the ankles of the criminal. It would at least slow him down from running. Maybe not as much as a pair of fractured legs would, but he still vaguely remembered the conversations about torturing Frank and how that was not a good way to treat your captives.

Gregor scooped up the Message stone and tapped it with his clawed finger to get it to activate. “Deputy Gregor reporting. Suspect apprehended on southbound road... maybe two or three miles out.”

**[Affirmative. Sending a group out your way now. Healer required?]**

Grugg shook his head at the ratman and smiled to himself as his Deputy gave the negative to the request. He may end up with a bruise or two, but none of his clothes were ruined, and he did get blood everywhere for a change. Plus, the criminal was apprehended. If he could, figuratively, squeeze some answers out of the man, it would have made all that walking in the heavy boots worth it.

“If Grugg gets off Fixion, will you answer questions?” he peered down at the uncomfortable looking man.

“M-maybe?”

“Good enough!” Grugg lurched off the man and back onto his feet, winding the spy as his weight shifted. “First question. What is favourite animal?”

Fixion glanced between the Detective and the Deputy in confusion as he tried to suck air back into his lungs. “Um... well, since being a lad, I’ve always had a fondness for badgers. Tough little gits, we had one that lived just out of our farmstead. Called him Bruiser.”

Grugg sat on the floor next to the prone Nightshade officer and smiled warmly. “When Grugg lived with tribe, there were wild boar that roamed nearby. Two of the big mean ones tribe called Basha and Grunt. Sometimes being tough and mean is best, huh?” The Detective laid his club gently beside him on the floor and rested his chin on his palms.

The spy sighed and closed his eyes, body relaxing as he faced the open skies. “You start thinking being the strongest or most powerful will get you a good name, and people might start looking up to you. But it easily leads you down the wrong roads.”

“How’d Fixion get in Nightshade?”

“I travelled a lot. In my youth, I left my family farm to try and grow stronger. Joined a group of runic monks for a few years, which is where I got these,” he raised and lowered his now inert rune-inscribed forearms. “But I wanted more, fell out with them. Got in trouble with the law in various places and eventually tried to make things work out in Helpart. Don Kean found out my history, somehow, and made me an offer.”

“Grugg got in trouble with family, moved to mountain but made some friends. Captain made me an offer. Sounds like Fixion need better friends.” The cyclops put his hand back in one of the pouches and withdrew some of the dried meat, and offered it to the spy.

A single tear ran down the side of Fixion’s face, falling to the floor. “I’d like to fight you again someday, when I am stronger.”

“Sure,” the Detective grinned. “Grugg will get stronger too. Maybe when Don Kean gets arrested, you will be able to have new start.”

Fixion pushed himself up to a sitting position and took a bite of the tough meat. “He is a difficult one, but I believe you can do it.”

“Detective,” Gregor spoke up from the side, “If you are quite done with your tea party, I can hear the Guard approaching.”

The faintest sound of hooves could be heard as a distant blob of brown formed in the distance. Grugg squinted his one eye, trying to discern exactly how far away they were. “No more escapin’,” he lectured.

‘Fixion, where can we find Don Kean?’

The man tensed up, and a wild panic filled his eyes, but whether this was due to the pointed nature of the question or the stated ‘demon’ of the cyclops now addressing him was unclear. Fixion glanced over at the approaching Guard before answering. “Nobody knows for sure. Even being one of his higher-ups I’ve never seen him. The rumours are he hides out somewhere beneath the town...”

‘The sewers?’

“Even lower than that,” he scratched at his temples as his eyes now rested on the hat. “But down there, they say it is all locked up, due to-”

‘Monsters?’

A slow nod was the only response.

It did not take a long time for the small wagon to catch up to where the scuffle had now cooled. A remorseful Fixion was loaded onto the one-horse cart manned by five guards. Grugg did not recognise any of them and was half expecting to see Patson as part of the collection team. Although, in fairness, the Guard had said he would be sleeping a lot, it was perhaps a stroke of luck that they had managed to get through to him on the Message stone, at least.

Gregor had filled out the necessary paperwork, and then the Nightshade spy was taken off back towards the town. Unfortunately, there was no room for the Detectives even if they had wanted to take the ride back - the wagon had already looked overburdened with the Guard themselves, and Grugg was a wagon-load all by himself.

The ratman looked up at the sky and clucked his tongue, his tail scratching behind one of his ears. "You will need to head back to the town if you are to get to the shops before closing, ser Grugg."

'We might as well skip the Lumberyard for now. Fixion was our tie there, and he has been dealt with and given us a lead on Don Kean. Living beneath the town is suspect, but would suit a shadowy spymaster.'

"Grugg agree, but Red and Gutblade have some 'splaining to do, soon." As much as he wanted to dig into why they had been led astray so that Fixion could attack them, the prospect of doing a little shopping and seeing Claudia sounded a lot more fun.

As the ratman nodded to him, the Detectives set off northwards along the stone road back to Helpart. "Fancy new spell, Bart."

Oh yes - I wasn't certain how it would work. It was a bit of a mix of meshing the contact delivery that I had managed to wrangle for Healing Pulse alongside the element of diverting the magic energy from when you were cursed. So in a way, I was pushing the magic power out of his body; it may have been less effective because it was runic-based magic rather than arcane, however...

As the wizard continued explaining the technicalities of his new spell to a half-listening Grugg, the party made their walk back to the town uncontested, if not at least worn out.

At the site of the combat, once the Detectives had vanished upon the horizon, a figure walked out of the forest. Upon reaching the middle of the road where the two had fought, the unknown observer dropped to all fours and sniffed at the dust and dirt.

Craning their head back, they let loose an animalistic howl.

Deep within the forest, echoes of the call rang out.