

Crittenden's Fate

By C. Jade Wyton

The death of a man sparks a conflict that seals the fate of the mine-owner Arthur Crittenden.

Contains some mentions of violence and death.

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It was 2:53pm when Chancy Everhart died.

Daimon remembered how he had been when he'd heard the news; flat on his back on his bedroom floor, his young daughter purring loudly as she napped curled-up on his chest.

He'd heard the front door slam—a furious action that never sounded through this house, despite the strength of its inhabitants—and carefully craned his neck up as his mother stormed past his open door to the room he shared with his husbands.

The conversation had been muffled and angry. And when Daimon's brothers had returned home shortly after, just as much venom in their voices as they hissed and spat in the main room, Daimon had carefully deposited Robin in his bed and made his way out to ask what, exactly, had happened.

There had been deaths before, of course. The mines were a dangerous place. Accidents happened.

But never before had someone died from *negligence*.

Daimon's fur had prickled when he'd heard the circumstances.

A piece of machinery that had been marked repeatedly for repairs had malfunctioned. And upon examination, the repairs that had been reported as complete had not even been attempted. Instead, the damaged part had simply been covered over and ignored.

Cheap greed had killed a good man and orphaned three young children.

And so now it was the second week of the union's strike against the mine's owners. Negotiations had been loud and firm with demands for higher standards of safety and compensation to Everhart's family at the forefront of the disagreement.

Daimon's mother had taken up responsibilities as the union's representative, as he always did when things got bad. Not that anyone else wasn't capable of it, of course. But Daimon's family had, ever since they'd taken on the job protecting the miners, proven themselves as strong and confident people who wouldn't budge under pressure. The miners believed in them, and they refused to break that trust.

His fathers and his brothers were intimidating enough on their own. But with Daimon's mother standing at the head of their little pride, they were a terrifying force.

Especially as Arthur Crittenden seemed to think, as Rueben kicked down his office door and marched his way inside; crossing his arms and flicking his tufty,

half-length mane from his eyes with a shake of his head.

‘We need to talk, *Crittenden*,’ his voice was a flat, venomous hiss as Daimon hurried into the room after his mother and took to his side.

Arthur had frozen statue-still in his soft-padded chair; his eyes wide and breath caught in his throat as Daimon’s brothers circled around and flanked him threateningly.

Daimon didn’t join them; instead staying by his mother as low growls echoed through the room. He knew his reputation now, at least in his hometown, was far from what it used to be before his retirement— He was no longer known as a threatening force, but a softer, kindly man who took no lead and simply offered his help where it was needed.

Though... by the way Arthur was looking at him, it was clear the man was all too aware that his strength hadn’t faded. And he also looked like he was aware of Daimon’s furious urge to crush the man’s head in a hand like an empty tin can.

And so when one of Daimon’s brother’s hands rested on Arthur’s shoulder, it was no surprise that the man was booted back into his own head with a start.

‘Rueben Stoneclaw, you can’t just bust in here like an— Like an—’ Arthur shrunk back as Rueben stepped forward to loom over him.

‘Like an *animal*?’ Rueben finished, his ears pinning back in disgust. ‘Caught the slur before it slipped this time, aye, Critten?’

‘You know *very* well that’s not what I meant,’ there was a clear attempt from Arthur to keep his tone even and strong; though it failed miserably as his voice quivered and he swallowed loudly. ‘I’d call a human an animal, if they broke my door down like you just did!’

‘And *I’d* call *you* a skinflint, if it weren’t a compliment compared to what you *actually* are,’ the snorted breath that escaped Rueben was strong enough to muss up Arthur’s slicked-back hair. ‘Your cheap-skated penny-pinching killed a man, and I’m not going to let you out of it just because you have money behind you.’

Daimon’s tail flicked furiously in silent agreement as he stayed in place.

Then, he saw his mother’s claws rise from the tips of his fingers as he stretched his hands furiously.

It was a subtle motion, that seemed to be missed by the rest of the room, but it made Daimon hesitate.

They were not here to draw blood.

They were here to secure justice for Everhart’s family.

He worried for a moment, for just a *moment* as his mother bared his teeth and leant forward, that his family might have forgotten it. But then his mother retracted his claws and stood straight, and Daimon let out a breath of relief.

‘This behaviour is *atrocious*!’ Arthur managed, his voice breaking in a squeak as one of Daimon’s many brothers gave a hiss in his ear. ‘You— You work for *me*! I hired you to—’

‘To protect the people working under you from harm!’ Rueben interrupted, his hand shooting out as he took Arthur by the throat. ‘And I intend to do my job. No matter what the threat may be.’

‘Ma, don’t,’ Daimon said, perhaps too softly as he went unheard.

‘Even if it’s *you*,’ Rueben growled, his grip tightening around Arthur’s throat.

‘Ma, stop, he’s elderly.’

'You're deranged,' Arthur managed, his hands scrabbling at Rueben's own.  
'You owe expiation to Everhart's family!'  
'I owe them *nothing!*'

The spat words were the last thing out of the man's mouth before he was hefted from his chair and held in the air; his legs kicking wildly as a strangled sound escaped him and Rueben's claws dug into his neck.

'Ma!' Daimon cried, grabbing his mother by the wrist as he tried, and failed, to yank his arm back down. 'Ma! Stop! You're going to kill him! Let him down!'

Rueben paused, then, though he didn't take his eyes from Arthur's as the man whimpered in his tight grip.

'Remember what you told me,' said Daimon, softly. 'We're meant to be the ethical ones. Barbarian code. Self-defence; not murder. No matter how mad you are.'

For a moment Daimon feared his mother might not listen; that he might kill Arthur right there in his anger. But then Daimon's brothers stepped to his side and flicked their ears in silent agreement and slowly, almost hesitantly, Rueben placed Arthur back in his chair.

The man took a deep breath as his throat was released, and fearfully threw out a hand to motion at the door. 'G-Go! Get out! Out! Leave me! Leave! *P-Please!*'

Shoulders slacking as the adrenaline left him, Daimon allowed his brothers to usher him out the door.

He returned home, still somewhat shaken, to his daughter's wonderful embrace and his brother-in-law's roast beef stew, and only truly calmed once he had retreated to his room for the night. He read Robin her favourite book, tucked her into the cot beside his own bed, and slept heavy and dreamless.

It was only the next morning that he heard the news.

Officer Ruth Everhart — Chancy's younger sister and now-guardian of his children— had knocked on their door close to five past ten, and Daimon was sure that Arthur was pressing charges.

But that was not the purpose of her visit.

No. Instead, it was something much more perplexing. Something Daimon couldn't wrap his brain around, no matter how hard he tried to.

Despite being their owner, Arthur Crittenden had never liked the mines. They frightened him. And as far as Daimon had known the old man, he had never purposely set foot in them. Not even once.

So it was much to his confusion when Officer Everhart reported that Mr Crittenden had fallen to his death down one of the deeper active shafts. She had chosen to rule it an accident; she herself had seen him drinking that day, and said there no point investigating further. There had been a shattered bottle of whisky beside his body, after all.

So, though Daimon didn't understand how it had happened, all the miners celebrated their win as Arthur's son shortly took over the company and caved to the union's wishes.

But it didn't make sense. Something didn't sit quite right in Daimon's gut about it; though he didn't spend too long thinking on it, as he quickly became distracted by his own life and pushed the thoughts of Arthur Crittenden to the back of his mind.

Perhaps, if Daimon had been wiser, he would have noticed Rueben was the only person in the town who had reacted calmly to the old man's fate.

And perhaps, if Robin hadn't been out to play in the garden that morning and rushed inside with a scattering of loose dirt and picked flowers, he would have noticed the dusty footprints that had not been at the door the night before.

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