

Chapter 74 - Red Red Red

Red stumbled backwards, physically and with his words. "D-detective? What happened t'everybody e-else?"

"Dead," Claudia answered flatly. "They wouldn't help so-" She made a twisting motion with her hand and feigned her head going limp.

"A-all of them?" The foreman's eyes darted between the pair and the doorway leading to the dining area, half wanting to check for himself, but more than half rooted to the spot in fear.

"Took long time," Grugg sighed as he approached the quaking man, "Very tired. But think Grugg have enough energy for *one... more... twist...*"

"No! I-I'll take you to the Captain, just don't hurt me." Tears began to well up in his eyes as he recoiled from the looming cyclops.

I would feel worse if he hadn't been so intentionally useless before.

The whimpering man turned and led them through the doorway he had just entered, into another hallway. Again, several closed doors were passed before they turned a sharp right corner, the passageway again continuing down with multiple doorways on each side. Grugg was taken aback at the size and scale of this underground lair; who would have thought the lumber yard would also be a front for a mining operation?

Red eventually stopped nervously outside a metal door which looked the same as any others they had passed.

"He's in here. Can I go now?"

Grugg shrugged. "Okay,"

The man scarpered as fast as his legs could take him off and round a corner until his escaping footsteps could be heard no more.

"Maybe we should have checked first," Claudia nudged the cyclops.

'We should have at least gotten eyeballs on the Captain before giving him the benefit of the doubt.'

Grugg rolled his eye. Whilst some scepticism was healthy, particularly in the life of a Detective, too much just had you questioning everything and down the path to conspiracy. Just because Red was a Nightshade criminal and had a record of being unhelpful to them, it didn't mean that... He stopped this train of thought as his conclusion caught up with the aspersions of the others. The Detective sighed and pushed the door open.

Perhaps expecting to see a room full of barred cages, or a chair with some restraints around it, the cyclops was instead greeted by five pairs of eyes - as a group of armoured men sat around a table playing cards in an otherwise mostly bare small chamber. They did not look

like lumber yard workers but rather some kind of elite guard, with the Nightshade flower embossed on their black leather shoulder pads.

The brief moment of shock was quickly replaced by rage as the men leapt up and drew weapons, knocking chairs and gambling chips to the floor in their rush.

“Under arrest?” Grugg managed to blurt out before the phrase went past deaf ears into the dark corners of the room, the first elite slashing out with a longsword. He jumped backwards to avoid being sliced and knocked into Claudia, sending the clothesmaker tumbling back onto the floor.

I don't think these guys are with the others.

The doorway stopped all five attackers from moving in at once, Grugg again finding an advantage in the chokepoints between rooms. “Sorry,” he shot at Claudia as she stood back up, bringing her glove and shield to bear. The slight distraction almost earned him a new belly button as the elite soldier jabbed forward with his blade, attempting to dislodge the Detective from the narrow threshold.

DESIST OR BE SLAIN

The Voice of the wizard echoed throughout the tunnels, the brief hesitation from the stunned criminals giving Grugg enough breathing room to step back and withdraw Thud. Being pushed back into the corridors was not ideal, so with clenched teeth, he launched himself forwards, knocking the sword out of the way with his club as he barreled into the first elite - sending him sprawling across the floor back into the chamber.

A Halberd from his left grazed against his arm, a slight cut that was close to being much worse. From his right, a grizzled man with a spiked mace and buckler moved into position to make a strike at the cyclops.

The whoosh of displaced air was followed by a crack as part of the room fell into darkness. The thin blue thread of The Storm tickled along Grugg's back as it raced across the air for the next light-gem. The Detective withdrew his left hand from his side, now adorned with one of his knuckle dusters and lashed out towards the halberd elite whilst using Thud to block the mace-wielding man.

The attack came up short, the criminal utilising the length of the halberd to keep further away from the hulking cyclops. But Grugg followed up with a wide overhead arc with Thud, knocking the weapon out of the elite's hands as they were forced to dodge away to avoid being crushed. This left him open on the flank - as an arrow struck into his side, and the Detective let out a roar of pain. The sound echoed by the Bowman as the large needle struck the man in the forearm, embedding slightly before twisting in place and withdrawing.

'Light'

The flash of bright sunlight stunned everyone in the room as Grugg leapt at the halberd elite and kicked at the man's knee with his heavy steel-capped boot - resulting in a sickening crack. Then, as the man dropped to the floor, a left hook from the iron knuckle dusters struck the criminal in the side of the head, a spray of crimson shooting across the grey stone walls.

The cyclops turned to see the bowman receive a second strike from The Storm - this one striking the man in the heart as the remaining elites tried to clear their eyesight from the fading white glare.

As the longsword fighter was helped up by the fumbling fifth elite guard, the mace user recovered first - leaping over the collapsing body of the bowman. Grugg easily blocked the attempted strikes of the weapon, repeated clangs against the steel cap of Thud, as he had both advantages in size and reach. He just needed to find the opportunity to attack, as the bearded criminal was relentless with their assault.

Now pushed to the side of the room, he watched as the swordsman and remaining member looked towards the melee and then ran out the door towards Claudia. A wave of panic and adrenaline coursed through Grugg, and he reached out to the maceman, taking the strike of the spiked metal end straight into his left arm as he grabbed the shocked Nightshade elite by the face. Then, with a quick motion, he snapped the man's head backwards and pushed past - the sound of metal and wood striking against one another from the hallway.

The final member of the elite group was standing in the doorway and whipped around to Grugg, not expecting him to have dealt with the mace user so promptly. He levied a wand in his hand, a long wooden stick of plain design with three red bands along it.

'Dispel.'

With the now useless stick outstretched towards the cyclops, no magic burst forth. A fact that was only acknowledged briefly by the would-be-caster as Grugg grabbed the hand and twisted the arm back with a snap - stabbing the man through the throat with the inert wand. He knocked the gurgling figure to the floor as he entered the hallway, singular eye blazing bright blue.

Claudia stood in the hallway, whereas the longsword elite did not. Her dress was torn on her right arm, revealing splayed bandages with a fresh gash, crimson soaking through. The man lay sprawled on the floor, a few cuts along his legs and side, the giant needle still wedged below his neck into his head. The clothesmaker dropped to the floor, panting and shivering, sweat running down her face.

Grugg stomped up and put his hand on her shoulder, concern for her wound replacing any fury he had built up.

'Healing Pulse.'

The warmth radiated through the Detective and into Claudia, and she coughed as some colour came back into her face.

'That will stop the bleeding and set you on the way to healing. We will need to bandage the arm again to keep it clean.'

"Yeah, yeah," she smiled weakly, "I know what I'm doing."

Grugg looked back at the fallen Nightshade elite, the large needle falling inert as the red glove was removed. "Can certainly fight okay."

“Not without you as my shield.” Claudia rested her head against Gruggs arm and sighed.

The warmth of the wizard's healing came back, but he felt it in his face more than his arm. Now that the adrenaline was wearing off, the sharp pain of his injury and the pooling blood in his palm told him that it had been a worse puncture than he had expected.

“Here, take my potion,” the clothesmaker pulled her glass bottle of red liquid out of her side bag, a look of concern on her face at the amount of blood running from the Detective's arm.

He reluctantly took it, leaving Thud on the floor as they both now sat in recovery. It was a nice enough tasting potion, not quite as good as food, but as the healing magic took effect, it brought a slight amount of comfort.

‘To Hell's with all this.’

The pulse of white light from the Moonchase Orb branched out through the tunnels to either side of them; this time Grugg did not see anything under the effect of the magic item - as he was not touching Thud.

“Bart can do a lot more without touch lately,” he observed out loud.

‘Yes, my power is growing every day now; I've been able to pick up new spells and work with things that we've- never mind for now. Look around so I can see anything highlighted.’

Grugg complied. With a grunt, he stood up and did a brief full turn so that the wizard could see all directions for anything of import.

‘Continue West, third door on the right. Now let me focus on healing you.’

The Detective smiled and nodded before turning back to Claudia and offering her a hand to help her up - which she accepted. “Which way West?” he whispered to her as though the wizard would not be able to hear.

‘Behind you!’

Taking a moment to haul the dead Nightshade elites back into the room, closing it behind him, Grugg continued down the passageway as indicated by Bart. He even counted the doors on his fingers, just to show how serious he was taking it.

“It's this one, Grugg,” Claudia stopped at a door as the cyclops continued to walk past.

He smiled sheepishly and nodded. Taking no chances, he brought Thud to bear and launched a swing at the door - shattering it straight off the hinges as it clattered noisily to the floor. Grugg leapt inside, surprised to find only a small chamber with a chair and table to the side. Across from him was another metal door; however, this one was thicker and sturdier-looking - a darker metal with horizontal bars along the entirety of it. Next to the handle, a sturdy lock was placed.

“Hmm, who Grugg have to beat up for a key?” He glared around the room, expecting it to reveal an alternate method of removing the barrier.

“Here,” Claudia held out a small ring of a couple of keys. “When I was getting The Storm back from... that body, I saw these - thought they’d come in handy.”

Grugg cooed and gestured for the clothesmaker to open the door. “Perhaps Claudia should be Detective?”

“Maybe we can talk about a promotion when we get back?” She smiled and approached the door, stopping right before attempting the first key. “Uh, could you get Bart to check for traps and anything else?”

If you will, Grugg.

As much as the cyclops was saddened to have the healing warmth fade away for a bit, he went and placed his hand on the door. It was cool, and the tingling of Bart doing his magic was an odd sensation.

‘Magic Lock - disabled. No traps.’

“Thanks, Bart,” Claudia smiled at the hat and placed the first key into the lock. Perhaps luckily, it turned out to be the correct one of the small bundle on the iron hoop, and it easily turned with a clunk as the door unlocked.

Grugg swung it open, ready for whatever lay inside; as his eye adjusted to the darker room lit instead by crimson light-gems, a seated figure slowly came into focus.

The Captain, bound and gagged, raised his bruised head.