

Chapter 68 - Crimson Threads

Grugg burst out of the guard Headquarters into the cool air of the darkened evening, Patson in tow. The pulsing light of the Alarm stone had stopped, but it echoed in the racing heartbeat of the Detective. Adrenaline surged through his weary body as the Focus potion kept him alert and on target - the route to Threads clearer in his mind than ever, despite his panic.

“Patson here, incident at Threads in the commerce district, any nearby Guard, please attend,” his voice already laboured from the short sprint; Patson still managed to speak clearly into a Message Stone. “Also... the Captain is missing; high alert issued.” He swore under his breath as he pocketed the magic item and rushed to catch up to the cyclops.

“Problem, Detective?” the voice of Lady Valoth came from a shadowed alleyway as she matched Grugg’s pace easily, her boots a shallow echo of his heavy stomps.

“Claudia trouble,” the cyclops managed to pant out as he ducked beneath an awning, almost sliding over as he took a sharp left turn.

The Investigator reached a hand out to touch his arm. “**Fleet Foot.**” A pulse of red light briefly glowed at the point of her fingers before both of their feet became enshrouded in a light red fog.

Bart murmured something in his head about magic types, but Grugg tuned it out, his footsteps increasing in speed. The evening’s air whipped past him, threatening to make his eye water as he turned another corner and then a third. They were getting closer now, and each second was tightening the knot in his stomach. It didn’t matter how unnaturally fast they had become; it was not quick enough.

Emerging onto the street that the clothesmaker’s shop was on, he could see the darkened windows ahead of him. There was no fire, at least, so he could cross that off of the dozens of terrible scenarios his mind had been concocting. The mixture of potions making him sharp enough to consider briefly that the potions themselves might be giving rise to such anxiety.

It was only a matter of a few brief seconds to get to the doorway now, each heavy footstep bringing his heart up into his throat. Valoth dropped behind slightly to allow the cyclops to take the lead, and he too, slowed as he reached the door - still swinging it open with some force.

It opened halfway before stopping, hitting into a dense object. There was also no tinkle of the bell overhead. Grugg pushed the door harder, shoving the blockage slowly out of the way. Already, an odd and discomfoting smell hit his nostrils.

‘Spark’

Several candles on the ceiling chandelier lit up the otherwise darkened room, revealing the state of the shop before them.

“*Seven Hells,*” the Investigator whispered behind the cyclops.

Grugg looked down at the pools of blood seeping into the wood of the shop floor. A body had been blocking the doorway - a figure clad in dark hooded robes. In the middle of the room, a similarly dressed man lay on his back, blood pooling around his head where something had punctured through his eye socket into his brain. Lashings and sprays of blood covered the many tables of clothes and dressed mannequins. Bloodied swords and daggers lay strewn across the floor.

Listen, Grugg, there is someone near.

A slight sound could be heard over the heartbeat pounding in the Detective's ears - groaning from the back room. He made his way across the shop floor and pushed the door open. He balled his fist, not having the space to even consider unslinging Thud.

To his left, lying on the stairs, head resting against the wall, was a very pale-looking Claudia. Her arms and chest were lacerated, and her dress soaked with blood. The red glove that controlled The Storm was on her right hand, but her left hand was just red from her wounds.

Lady Valoth pushed past over to the woman whilst Grugg stood in shock. "Unconscious, laboured breathing - but alive. I can stabilise her." The Investigator's eyes flashed red over to the cyclops, then to the other side of the room, before she rested her hand on the injured clothesmaker and began channelling a spell.

Grugg turned to the right side of the room and saw the cause of the groaning the wizard had picked up on. A third cloaked figure sat propped up against the far wall table; legs splayed apart in a pool of red. Pain and cold sweat gripped the face of a young man; his exhaustion and agony were only now second to the fear of seeing the Detective. The giant needle slowly turned in the man's thigh, impaled down into the wooden floor. With the controller unconscious but still powering The Storm, it would be impossible for the man to remove it himself without further injuring his leg.

It took everything that Grugg had not to immediately go and pulp the head of the criminal underneath his boot. Instead, he stomped over to the pained man and squatted down, his eye blazing electric-blue in pure anger.

"Criminal lucky Grugg in civil-ized town," he seethed through clenched teeth. Then, turning back to Peony, he gestured for the monochrome Investigator to remove the red glove.

As she did so, the large dagger-like needle fell inert in the wound, and the cyclops removed it with little care. The man whimpered and twitched both in relief and shock, tears beginning to well up in his eyes.

The dull metallic thud of plated boots signalled the arrival of Patson and two other Guard. Red-faced and panting heavily, sword drawn, he cursed loudly as they entered into the shop and saw the dead bodies.

"We need a perimeter set up around here, close the street down. Call in support and clean up." Noticing the Detective through the back room, he came forward to meet them, swearing again as he saw the state of Claudia. "Hells, what a night."

'Secure the criminal, Patson.'

“Yes, uh, Hat?” The Guard made to do so as the cyclops walked back over to the wounded woman.

“She is stabilised,” Lady Valoth looked up to the Detective, “I’m no healer, but I have stopped the bleeding. Also, did your hat just talk?”

‘We’ll have a proper introduction later; I’m about to need a bit of a rest.’

Grugg placed his hand gently on the arm of Claudia, closing his eye to try and will his own power into healing his friend.

‘Healing Pulse.’

A surge flowed through the Detective’s body and out through his hand, more potent than the one used on Gregor. He opened his eye up once more as a single tear rolled down his face. Some of the larger gashes began closing up, and a bit of colour returned to her face. Claudia stirred a little but did not wake.

She will need a lot of rest and a lot more healing. Carry her, and I will see if I can share Healing Ward through you both whilst I regain my strength.

Grugg’s head swam. The Dungeon, being arrested, fighting Blackjack, the Captain being missing, and now the attack on Claudia. The pressure was starting to mount, and he needed to let off steam or have some kind of satisfied peaceful ending to the day. He had almost died, almost been locked away for good, and now he was in the throes of cold sweat from the potions he drank. Things were starting to get out of control, and he was losing it; maybe he should-

“Honestly, can’t leave you alone for one day,” the rolling red eyes entering the shop belying the arrival of Gregor, his tone softening to a worry as he stepped over the bloodied corpses.

“Grugg glad Gregor okay,” the cyclops beamed, relief washing over him in seeing his Deputy arrive.

“Oh,” the ratman turned to Patson as he entered the back room, “Sorry about your friend in the sewer.”

Patson clucked his tongue. “Wasn’t my friend, but apology accepted.”

Gregor then turned to the body of Claudia with Lady Valoth close by, a mixture of emotions showing on his face despite his intention to mask them. “Is Lady Clothesmaker okay? And why is Lady Investigator here?”

“I have a name, ‘Mr Rat’,” Peony narrowed her eyes at the Deputy, “Grugg, I said I’d help you get out of jail - but you just broke out? Patson here is fine with that?”

“Oh,” Grugg looked down at his wrists to see the manacles and chains still affixed - in the rush, he hadn’t asked the Guard to unlock him. “Wasn’t Captain in there, was Blackjack. Real Captain missing.”

“Ser Captain is missing, and you fought Blackjack again?” Gregor grimaced whilst glaring at Lady Valoth. “But Lady Clothesmaker was also attacked?”

Grugg nodded. That about summed everything up. Anything else they missed out, they would have to go over another time when his brain didn't feel like it was degrading into soup. Not even good soup, probably the kind he would make. With those thoughts shaken from his head, he watched as the ratman dug his Healing Potion bottle out of his bag and tossed it to the Investigator.

“Thanks... partner,” she nodded with a wry smile.

The Deputy took a momentary pause to consider whether the woman had suddenly taken to using colloquial phrases before turning to the cyclops with a scowl, Grugg responding with a sheepish shrug.

“Oh, don't get all tied up; this is just a temporary thing - my organisation wouldn't take too kindly to me moonlighting,” she continued, swirling the red liquid around in the glass bottle.

Grugg pouted at the news. He hadn't considered that in the moment, but that ultimately made sense. “Lady friend Raulo was killed in safehouse. Joining Eyes so together can beat Nightshade better.”

The tail of the ratman waved in the air as he folded his arms. “I am sorry to hear that, Lady Investigator. I hope you do not die in our safehouse also.”

“Is safehouse still safe? Grugg need sleep, Claudia need sleep, but Grugg need to keep Claudia safe.”

“I can keep watch for most of the night,” Lady Valoth offered. “It would make the most sense for all of us to stick together until things cool down.”

“I can stay up too,” Gregor murmured as his mistrusting eyes watched the Investigator intently.

Patson scratched his chin. “Safehouse probably is your best bet. I will send a couple of Guard to stand watch outside tonight. We will have teams throughout the town in search of the Captain too.”

“Grugg help tomorrow, after rest.” The other Private Eyes nodded in agreement, which Patson graciously accepted.

“We will see if we can dig up any leads as we cast our net. I'm not sure where we will begin really; this has blindsided us somewhat. But we'll start with his patrol route. No doubt the Mayor will be chewing our ears out come morning.” Patson lifted up the criminal to his feet, ignoring the stifled yelps of pain, as he gestured for one of the other Guard to assist. “We will take this guy in and tend to him; then, he is yours to question when you are free.”

Grugg nodded and glared at the young Nightshade would-be-assassin, still half tempted to strike him down where he stood. Answers would be more beneficial than a moment of catharsis, he told himself, only vaguely aware of what that meant.

"I appreciate your patience, Detective," Patson continued, making the gesture of a key unlocking as he pointed at the manacles on Grugg's wrists. "In your position, I am sure I would have just twisted this man's head off without a second thought."

"If criminal still has head, chance to twist off never too late." Grugg glared at the pale man, who couldn't keep eye contact with the looming Detective.

Gregor twitched his nose and looked around the shop interior, the usual smells of fabrics were now layered with a dose of blood, but there was something else too. Just as Patson and a second guard were escorting the injured Nightshade thug through the door, the ratman held out a hand to stop them.

"Ser Grugg, does Lady Claudia own a dog?"

The Detective shook his head, "No animals that Grugg has seen."

Deputy Gregor licked his fangs, his red eyes glowing brightly in the dim light.

"Then it must be these sers that smell of wet fur."