



The Third Case: Red Riding

Hood

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Mystery, Retold Fairy Tales

“Poor girl, scared to death by a big bad wolf ...”

“Oh, she must be so traumatized ...”

“And her grandmother had to suffer, what an unpleasant experience ...”

“Do you think her granny ever received that basket?”

“Its a shame, really. She was only a little girl ...”

What was in the basket?

Who was Old Granny Red?

What happened to the Big Bad Wolf?

Why, out of all the colours, red?

Fantasy Investigator, Journalist, and Detective, reporting for duty.

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Thug’s boss had the ability to unnerve the daylights out of him. Today was one of those days.

“Mam,” he began carefully, knowing fully well that she did not appreciate him questioning her methods. “Are – are you sure that this is the correct forest? Perhaps it was the one we passed – a few kilometres behind –”

“Thug,” she said, not removing her eyes from the tree tops, “can you feel it? The power of this forest? It buzzes in the air.”

Thug could not feel it. But he did feel unnerved once again. And mind-numbing fear.

They stood at the edge of the forest, having prepared for a long journey for an entire week before. The trees stood unnaturally tall and dense. It was evident from the burst of sound that this forest was home to many creatures. Chirps, wails, barks, growls, moans – even quiet mutters that seemed to erupt from the very shrubs itself – filled Thug’s ears.

“Do not fear, Thug. I’m here with you,” she told him. “Besides, one wandering in a forest is a horror story. But two is a fairy tale.”

The latter’s heart pounded ever faster.

As was usually the case, Thug had no idea where this investigation would lead them this time. His boss had simply instructed him to gather supplies to last them a few weeks, before she had summoned her beloved ship – The Con-Artist – to assume bicycle mode. Then they had left the Polkadot Mansion behind them, trotting toward an unknown destination with an air of mystery.

They had been standing at the edge of the forest for about ten minutes. Polkadot remained rigid as a statue, her neck craned upwards, her hands deep in the pockets of her navy-blue coat. Behind them the sun dipped below the mountains, casting an ominous shadow over them. Thug exhaled shakily. He was not liking the looks of it already.

“This, Thug,” said Polkadot, finally turning to look at him, “this is the forest where legends happened, happens, and – as we delve into it – will happen.”

That being said, Fantasy Investigator and Journalist, Polkadot, clutched the handle bars of her innocent looking blue bicycle and started into the Forest of Legend.

Thug hesitated for a moment. But as her form disappeared into the heavy darkness, he rushed to follow her.

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Inside the forest, it was a completely different world. With each step forward, Thug felt every instinct to take a

hundred steps back. His boss could not appear more unhindered.

“Do you remember that tale, Thug, about the girl with the red hood?”

Thug was taken aback by her conversational tone. A chill ran up his spine, prickling the hairs on his neck for no apparent reason. He clung closer to his boss’s coat, attempting to conceal the fear in his voice. “Yes.”

“Hmm,” she hummed. “Do you also remember, then, that there weren’t many details about that story?”

Thug frowned despite himself. “I wouldn’t say that, mam. The story was quite explicit in its description and plot. A girl with a red hood visits her grandmother, only to find the villainous wolf in her place.”

Polkadot’s lips curled at the edges slightly. “Ah, yes, that’s one of the versions.”

Thug snuggled closer to his boss’s coat but remained confused in silence. At once, the mass of sounds became too overwhelming. It was as if they were trodding on the back of some marvellous beast as it slept, snoring.

Polkadot was unfazed. The bicycle – or rather, The Con-Artist disguised as a bicycle – rang its bell, almost impatiently. A shrill sound.

“Almost,” Polkadot murmured.

Before Thug could let his mind wonder, she stopped abruptly. She looked above. Thug followed her gaze but saw nothing of interest – unless she was particularly interested in observing the pitch blackness above them. No doubt, it was night-time now. Thug could not see the sky, so dense and tall were the trees. His wings shivered fearfully.

“Caravan mode.”

Thug stared at his boss, aghast. “Mam? Are we camping here?”

She patted the fur on his head. “Yes.” Behind her, the bicycle morphed and grinded. “Did you think that this investigation would be concluded within one night? Alas, this one is going to be different.”

“Different, mam?”

More grinding and crunching from the bicycle-caravan hybrid.

“Yes, Thug,” her eyes pounced from tree to tree suspiciously. “We’re not even in the forest yet.”

“What?”

“Good job,” she spoke to her caravan the way one would speak to one’s dog. The vehicle in question was parked innocently, an outstanding navy-blue thing, with a tattered flag bearing the words ‘The Con-Artist’ sticking out where its antenna should have been. A crude looking skull with a matching blue bow-tie was stuck at the front.

“Now, Thug, we camp.”

Thug glanced at the voids of black around him – everything seemed frightfully horrific. His wings shivered some more. “For – for how long, mam?”

“Until the Forest lets us enter. It may be a waiting game. It may not. We must be stubborn in our stance if we wish to conclude this investigation.” She looked at him questioningly. “You do wish to conclude this investigation, Thug?”

“Of course I do, mam,” he told her instinctively. “I’m your faithful assistant for life.”

He could not see her expression as she turned to enter the caravan. “Then, Thug, as my faithful assistant for life, slow your wings down a bit and catch a nap. I dare say the Forest will give up and let us enter by dawn.”

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Thug did not sleep, and neither did his boss. She sat cross legged opposite him, her eyes closed in meditation. The orange orbs floating around them shed little light. He did not know how long they waited. The multitude of sounds from the forest was muffled by the shelter of the caravan – but not completely so that Thug didn’t hear strange noises. Occasionally, The Con-Artist crunched, or groaned, like a person snorting in their sleep. This is alright, Thug consoled himself as he always did. I’ve had more restless nights than these in the Polkadot Mansion. Like this, he had almost lulled himself to sleep.

Almost.

He froze upon hearing the footsteps, wide awake, the fur on his body standing on end.

Polkadot opened her eyes. They stared at each other for a tense second.

Then, she said: “Follow.”

“What –”

But she was already out of the caravan. Thug flew quickly behind her, trying to catch up as she fast-walked. The forest-sounds burst wildly into his ears again, and the darkness was penetrating, but Thug flew. They had left The Con-Artist behind them when he realised that they were hurriedly following the footsteps. Dread coursed through his veins.

“Mam!” he whispered, terribly wanting to scream instead.

She quickened her pace, eyes fixed on somebody ahead of them, winding through the trees – somebody who moved incredibly fast – something flowy like fabric – something red –

Thug grabbed onto his boss’s cloak to prevent himself from screaming in horror. Polkadot accelerated further, dragging Thug along through the woods.

The forest opened into a small clearing, and the girl they followed slowed down to halt in front of them, her red hood fluttering to a still.

And then Thug saw it, the cottage built into a small hill, its door comfortably camouflaged behind shrubs. Polkadot and Thug stood and watched as the girl with the red hood bent down and picked up a basket, making towards the cottage. She knocked on the door. Once. Twice. The door opened, revealing an old lady. Both girl and grandmother went into the cottage. The door closed. Bang.

Thug’s heart pounded in the silence. “Mam –”

“Wait.”

At that exact moment, there was a terrifying yell that broke off as suddenly as it started – and the cottage door burst open. A large howling beast erupted out of the small house – tearing off the clothing it wore – the old granny’s clothing. It opened its mouth to howl some more – and Thug saw the array of teeth, each fang dripped with blood.

The beast fixed its predatory eyes on them.

Thug obeyed his instinct and made to flee – but his boss caught him with a tight grip.

“Mam! It will kill us!”

She looked at him, almost amused.

“Mam!”

The wolf advanced.

Thug was suddenly yanked upwards and thrown directly toward the wolf – he would have yelled all his lungs out if it hadn't happened too quickly for him to even register it before he was hurling toward his death –

But the next moment, he landed on soil instead.

The wolf vanished. Behind him, The Con-Artist grunted.

Thug stared up at this boss, astonished. His heart still raced, not quite sure what just occurred.

“Mam? Are you – are you alright?”

For Thug had noticed her expression. Now, she no longer looked amused. She frowned slightly, listening.

“We're in the Forest now, Thug.”

“Mam?” He sputtered.

“The Forest of Legend. This is it.” She turned her head sideways, catching a sound Thug couldn't hear himself.

“Something has followed us.”

“The girl, mam? The girl with the red hood? We followed her that way –” he cut short when he realised they had returned to their original spot. The cottage they saw – the wolf –

“No, Thug. That was no girl. That was all an illusion for visitors. This – this is the reason we're here.” She paused, listening to something even more attentively. “Something has been following us – following the scent of your blood.”

“You should not have come here.”

Thug felt a chill. He spun around to the source of the voice but saw nothing through the darkness. He gripped his boss's coat.

A pair of animal eyes caught the light.

"You should not have come here." The voice repeated. "You have no business here."

Polkadot stepped forward. "Funny you should mention 'business', for that is the sole reason that brought me here."

Silence. Then: "I do not know how you entered. If you fear your life, you will use your methods and return to your realm."

"I can hardly do that, now," said Polkadot. "Besides, I don't have a life to fear."

More silence followed as their companion considered her remark. Thug heard sniffing.

"I smell powerful blood. But it is not yours."

"Oh, this is my assistant. Thug."

The eyes laid its gaze on him. "Your blood will kill you if you do not leave this instant."

Thug's gripped tightened on his boss's coat.

"Now, that's not a kind thing to say," said Polkadot.

"I am not kind."

"Then why are you warning us to save our lives?"

"Because you do not know what you have gotten into."

"That's extremely kind of you."

"Your life will not be spared." There was a hint of impatience in the voice. "I tell you, leave. Leave now!"

"No."

In the distance, there was a howl. Wolf-like.

“No?” The voice said, more impatient yet. “You humans are more ignorant than I thought!”

“And you are mistaken,” Polkadot took another step forward. “See, I am not human, and I think that you have gathered that Thug here isn’t human either.”

Another howl filled the silence. Louder.

“You hear that?” The voice pressed. “They’ve picked up your scent. They’re coming for you. Leave!”

“Ah, well, let them come. I think they will be surprised when they drink Thug’s blood.”

“Argh! You do not heed the advice!” Their companion leapt out of the shadows angrily, towering over them. Thug’s fear swelled within him.

It was the wolf.

“Save your life and go!”

“No, I will not do that.” Polkadot said stubbornly.

There was a third howl, closer than before.

The wolf sniffed again, more violently, his eyes jumped from Thug to Polkadot.

“I smell only his blood! And you – you have no blood –”

“That is true, yes.”

The wolf’s eyes widened. “You are one of them!”

Polkadot shook her head. She unhinged her coat from Thug and stepped closer to the beast, closing the distance between them. “It has been a terrible time for you in this prison, trapped here for all eternity, playing cat and mouse. That time has come to an end.”

The wolf's eyes grew wider yet, but something other than frustration and impatience filled it. It looked as if he had finally realised that Polkadot was no ordinary person. When he spoke again, his voice was feeble. "Who are you?"

Thug saw his boss smile. "Fantasy investigator, journalist, and detective, Polkadot. I solve cases – murders, crimes, stolen items, lost myths, cover conspiracies. I am never hired. Special gifts often aid me in a way another investigator would never be aided. I leave when the case is completely solved –" she paused to touch the wolf on his arm, but her palm went straight through him. She looked in his eyes, "– and when the souls of the dead are freed."

The wolf seemed to deflate. He merely stared at her, dumbfounded.

Next thing, there was a final howl, quite nearby. It ended short, followed by an eerie silence.

The silence was broken by the sound of shuffling branches. All three of them turned just in time to see it. Right there – on the tip of the highest branch, silhouetted by the full moon – a basket hung.

"It's too late now –" the wolf said fearfully, "it's too late – if there really is anything you can do – you'll die before you do it – those howls are not a wolf's –"

"Where is she?" Polkadot demanded.

"The coat – the coat – its too late ..."

The wolf gestured behind them. Floating there, eerily, silently, was the infamous red hood. Moments passed in terrific silence, even the forest seemed to have held its breath.

Then the girl appeared from nowhere and gripped Polkadot at her throat, lashing and howling. Thug watched helplessly and his boss and the girl with the red hood became a frenzied blur. Even in the darkness, Thug saw blue and red fight each other fiercely.

"It's too late – too late –" the wolf kept mumbling.

"My boss will save you." Thug told him.

The wolf shook his massive head. “You don’t understand – its not Red! She died that day!”

“What?”

The wolf shivered. “She died! Her grandmother – that devil – bit her. Ever since then we’ve been trapped here! They’ve been hunting me all those years! They want to kill me, too!”

“THUG!”

It was the first time he ever heard his boss yell for him like this. His heart leapt suddenly for her. “Mam! I’m here!”

“Your paws! Glow!”

He didn’t think. He simply obeyed. He rubbed his paws together. Gradually, it grew in brightness, lighting up the forest immensely. He threw himself, hands first, into the fighting frenzy between his boss and the girl, not exactly knowing what it would do. He shut his eyes. For a moment, everything exploded in light. The last thing he heard was an ear-deafening scream.

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When he opened his eyes again, his saw that he was in a pile of ash. His boss looked down at him solemnly.

“You did good, Thug.”

“I did?”

“Yes.” She gestured at the ash. “You killed her.”

A third voice said: “She was already dead.”

Thug turned to see the wolf, bent on his haunches, head hung low in misery.

“You don’t understand what you’ve done,” he said. “You’ve only made things worse. Her grandmother – the old lady – she’ll come for me. And for you. She’ll hunt you down. She’ll kill us. She’ll kill me.”

Polkadot turned her attention to the wolf. She bent on one knee, lowering herself to his level. “She can’t kill you. You’re already dead, too.”

The wolf looked up. “I ... am?”

“The day she was bitten, the day she became a vampire, she killed you. Her white coat turned red with your blood.”

“I ... remember now.” His head hung lower. “Yes, I remember now. The forest imprisoned us in this realm. She was to hunt me down all eternity. And I was to fear her all eternity.”

“She’s gone now.” Polkadot said gently.

He shook his head. “But the old lady – she’ll hunt you down. She has a clan of vampires. She’ll hunt you down for your blood. And this one –” he looked at Thug, “– would be the greatest prize.”

“Yes,” Polkadot said, unfazed. She stood. “But you are free.”

“No,” he replied miserably. “This is my prison. I can never leave this forest.”

“Ah, but I meant that you are free to leave this world.”

The wolf looked at her questioningly, but all was soon answered. Right in front of Thug’s eyes, the wolf’s spirit gradually faded like mist.

When he was entirely gone, Polkadot nodded satisfactorily. She turned to Thug and said: “A vampire clan. Red’s grandmother grew a vampire clan.” She picked up the basket that had been lying next to the mound of ash.

Thoughtfully, she observed the outside before peeking into its contents. With a look of disgust, she placed it back on the ground. She nodded once again. “Vampires. Blood and red and vampires.” The case was solved.

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It was the next morning when they had left the forest. Thug felt great relief upon seeing those trees far behind him, and all the horrors that came with it. He flew happily alongside his boss now, as she walked with her hand gripping the handlebars of her bicycle. They were at the very top of the hill’s crest. Polkadot paused to admire

the view of the sunrise when a sudden fleeting thought occurred to Thug.

“Mam,” he inquired. “What about Old Granny Red?”

“I suppose we’ll meet her again sometime soon. And now that Red and the Wolf are dead, the realm is open to this world.”

They dwelled the severities of that thought in silence.

Then, she continued heartlessly: “But that is all for later. Come, Thug. I’m feeling a need for a change of scenery now.”

“Change of scenery?”

“All these forests, and spirits and deaths, it’s very tiresome.”

“I can’t say I disagree.”

She chuckled. “You fear too easily, I think. But yes, a change of scenery.” She paused, staring directly at the sun and the horizon beyond. “Yes, I feel like mingling with civilisation again. Perhaps soon we’ll go to a ball.”

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