

# Rocket's Red Glaring

Even the three demons could tell that it was a nice night. The twilight had that rush-of-Essence feel to it, the pleasant breeze carried with it a certain spice, the temperature quite acceptable for the month and location... all quite attractive. Even the fact that there were no talking monkeys to slap around wasn't an issue; the business they had would have made an audience a problem. An easily fixed and buried problem, to be sure, but none of the three felt like digging more than one grave tonight. The leader swatted at a firefly as he poked a head around the corner of the restaurant. There was their quarry, on the patio, just as expected.

Their victim was both facing and obviously waiting for the demons: knobbed hands resting easily on the knees of his striped pants; antique blue coat neatly slung over a chair; top hat already knocked askew on a lined, but vigorous face. He didn't look amused to see them, either. Not unexpected, and neither was the lack of fear in his cold, blue eyes.

The three demons stopped well short of the old man. The leader formally cleared his throat; there were *formalities*, after all.

"**Uncle**," -- *not* an honorific, and the old man most assuredly did not take it as such -- "you know you're not supposed to run off like this."

In response, the very slightest narrowing of eyes, yoked to a voice colder than the eyes: "One chance. Turn around, walk away, start coming up with an excuse."

"The Boss has heard them all already. Now we can do this the easy way, or hard --" A bark of laughter interrupted the demon.

"Tain't up to you whether this is easy or hard." The old man seemed flushed with anger, to the mild surprise of the leader (although that might have been from the glow of the insects). "Tain't up to you to say who I belong to, either. I was here when your 'Boss' was just another leech humping cathode rays, and I'll be here to see him canceled, too. I say this with no personal reflection on you, of course: you didn't ask to end up yoked to the shiftless peckerwood. I **am** surprised that you haven't

gotten shut of him by now, but then I guess that being yellow's what they call a survival tactic among your kind."

The leader readjusted the grip on the collar of his more excitable colleague, who had been ready to start swinging right about the "cathode rays" portion. "Wait." A quick cuff. "And don't glare at me. He'll eat every word of that. If he's lucky." An even quicker look at the third demon. "Hit the switch!"

The third demon theatrically brandished a box with a large red button, then even more theatrically pushed it. A faint green glow suffused the patio as eldritch energies formed a translucent dome overhead. The old man's only reaction was to raise a bushy eyebrow.

"I'm sure that you'll tell me why I'm supposed to be scared now."

"I can't wait, **Uncle**. That's a new toy we borrowed from the Genius Prince. It's shutting you off completely from the juice you're -- what's the word? Right: 'leeching' -- from the talking monkeys. You're going to have to fight us on whatever you brought in you already, and you know something? I don't think that you've got enough to take us

all down." The three all started flexing a little. "It'll be fun to watch you try, though."

The old man stood up. "I won't bother to try to explain to you the difference between taking and receiving; if you knew it you wouldn't be here. Nybbas does this every year, and it's getting old. It's my *birthday*, dammit. I got better things to do with my time than school ignorant demons that he's too busy to chastise himself.

"Let me mention two things that you *mamzers* might have missed. One, this is my Day. I don't get more powerful than this. I've got hundreds of millions of people celebrating and watching the fireworks and going 'ooh.' That's oomph. That's enough oomph to give the **fireworks** some juice, ya, you betcha. People believe in 'em, at least a little, you know? Not enough to let the spirits in them last too long, but enough. It works out, though: they sorta know to come look for me, and I find something for them to do. Blaze of glory, you know. That's the first thing. The second?"

Every "firefly" trapped in the patio suddenly stopped in midair, and hovered. The demons blinked. Their leader blanched as he remembered that pleasant breezes on Earth generally didn't involve sulfur.

"The second thing that you missed is that *fireflies don't glow red.*"

Uncle Sam smiled. "Which means that *I'm* not trapped in here with *you*, boys: all y'all are trapped in here with *us*. Guess you should've run when I told you to." He looked at the "fireflies." "You dudes ready? Yeah? Well, all right, then.

"Fire in the hole."

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