

Chapter 100 - Case Closed

It was a new day. One that started with bloodied hands, the stench of the underground, or even the minor threat of antagonistic thugs. It was already the third day of rest, the slight extension of a needed respite from a traumatic week. The first had been spent on sleep and food—the second on mourning for those lost or fallen.

This third would be their last, with the wagon ready to go onwards to Galeden.

The training dummy sat alone in the basement. Not that they would complain - alone was their nature state of being. The prospect of training more regularly had given them the sense of... not happiness, just fulfilment, perhaps.

Despite their shortcomings, this new group of weaklings had shown the capacity for growth. More so than the wiggly worms that had since come and gone. Meat Man had been generous enough to provide the dummy with a box to sleep in during their travels. The fact that it resembled a coffin did not bother Unhappy.

They looked up to the scrawling above the door - a common and often practised task. How funny it was that they could read the letters, understand their individual merit and that they came to be a whole word. But these two words they could not say. Not out loud. Not even in their round, padded head. It would have been maddening had they the capacity for such weakness.

One Day, they thought, I'd Like To Be Able To Say... That.

"I'll be sorry to see them go if I'm honest." The Captain itched at the sling holding his left arm up, knocking over a small row of animal statues on his desk. He sighed, seemingly more exasperated than annoyed at the tiny accident.

"You did just say they were loose cannons," Peony smiled, picking the ornaments up and placing them back in position. She leaned back in her chair and drummed her fingers on her folder, casually eyeing up the Captain's office.

"Some problems require a cannon... like pirate galleons." He shrugged at the lousy analogy.

"They get the job done; sometimes, that is good enough no matter the methods used. I've known a fair few Detectives in my time, Captain. Most either turn to vice or worse after a few years. The truth is often a dirty, grimy, and dangerous thing. The work is often friendless and without thanks."

"Yes, yes," he waved his free hand, "you don't need to tell me that. But Grugg is different, as he has a view detached from the societal norm."

“He views things simply, true. He is not an uncaring or thoughtless creature, but his moral compass is mostly rock solid.” A wry smile spread across the Investigator's pale face.

“Mostly, as he is part childlike wonder, part extrajudicial exterminator?” It was a pointed question, but the Captain sighed and continued. “He is earnest enough that it is hard to hold him to account - not because he could snap me like a twig, but that he would genuinely feel terrible. Like a scolded puppy.”

“A scolded puppy that could snap you like a twig.”

Wanu leaned back in his chair and looked at the ceiling, eyes closed. He slowly exhaled before returning a tired gaze towards Lady Valoth. “We'll keep the Great Ancients locked up best we can - we are working on a pardon for Edward, so we'll at least have a studious eye on one of them at all times.”

“And of Dogman?”

“The Crown is sending a proper service to cart him off somewhere - anywhere he isn't my problem is fine by me.”

“Perfect, as I'd hate to have to send the Detectives back here if there were any problems.”

The Captain shook his head with a sad smile.

“I hope Galeden knows what they have coming.”

The door of the Greyjoy Emporium soundlessly opened, letting in the breeze of the otherwise moderate day. Whatever relief the mountains had found in allowing the darkened rain of the days before, a clear sky and middling temperature had been the apology granted.

“Huh, who is it?” Eleanor stood from her chair and looked at the doorway, brow furrowed. “Surely not!”

“Surprised?” Bart smiled as he walked into the shop.

“But how... is that really you, Barthélemy?”

“As close as I'll probably ever get,” he shrugged. “I did some magic that went a bit awry.”

“I did tell you that Brooch would go to your head; at least you still have one,” she wagged a told-you-so finger at him but smiled.

“I got you these, too. I hope this is not too presumptuous?” The wizard withdrew a bunch of flowers, a mix of ambers and whites, from behind his back.

“Turtle!” Her amethyst eyes glistened. “Why, certainly a lot more forward than I'm used to.

But appreciated.”

“Being trapped in a hat for two weeks, unable to sleep, allowed me plenty of time to reflect. On who I am, where my life was going.”

“And who are you?” she smiled warmly, taking the offered bouquet.

“Currently a shapeshifter with little magical capability, soon to be on the road to dismantle a country-spanning criminal organisation intent on digging up ancient relics of unimaginable power.” He sat at one of the more comfortable chairs and sighed.

“That’s a lot, Bart.” She pouted and drummed her fingers on the counter. “So all that magical prowess and world-ending possibility you were working up to?”

“I can shapeshift into myself, or just my hat, and can barely maintain Healing Ward for a few seconds - but that’s it.” Bart closed his eyes. He didn’t feel much like a wizard anymore. The thought of wearing anything other than his robes was uncomfortable, though he would cling to that at the least.

Eleanor started rummaging around behind the counter, and he opened his eyes.

“What are you looking for?”

“Well,” she smiled, placing a couple of heavy books onto the counter with a thud, “if you are going soon, we will need to get you learning! What would Harlan say to see you unable to cast a single spell.”

“This is where you used to live then?” Claudia peered around the mountain cave.

“Uh, yeah,” Grugg grinned sheepishly, “is not much.”

“It’s certainly rustic,” she playfully smiled at the cyclops, “did you make the furniture yourself?”

Grugg nodded, the black trilby falling from his head.

It had only been a couple of weeks, so he hadn’t expected his cave home to have been retaken by nature... in the cold light of day, had things always looked so dire? Perhaps he had just settled at the time and became used to the minimal things he had. What else could he have expected? He leaned down to pick the hat back up.

“Huh. This where killed Bart.”

“This whole story began because you murdered a man, right?” She wrapped her arm around his and looked down at the otherwise typical patch of grime-laden rough stone.

“By accident,” he huffed before smiling down at the clothesmaker. “Not like Claudia.”

“Mine was kind of accidental too! I’m sure our path will take us further down the road of destruction...” She glanced off into the shallow depths of the dark cave before turning back to the Detective. “Now, let’s eat, shall we?”

They went and sat at the cavern entrance, looking out to the valley beyond. At the base of the treeline, Helpart sat - an otherwise pleasant-looking town that gave no hint of the treachery, seedy criminal empire, or the roughshod actions of a handful of reckless Detectives that had taken place over the past few weeks.

Claudia placed the picnic basket between them and kicked off her shoes, the cyclops doing the same with his boots. They wiggled their toes at the freedom and the fresh mountain air that breezed through - the sound of rustling leaves was the only noise for a while as the sun tried to pretend it was spring and not the cusp of winter.

“It sure is beautiful up here,” Claudia looked out to the beyond, taking a bite of a goat meat sandwich.

“High up is yeti; they not so good.”

“Do we need to go kill them?” The clothesmaker narrowed her eyes and stopped chewing.

“Don’t tempt Grugg,” he shook his head as they both burst out into laughter.

Gregor put away the Magic Eye stone. He had watched the wizard go see the arcanist, but the shop was too protected to spy further. Likewise, the Investigator was shielded inside the Captain’s office that she entered this morning. He had followed Grugg and the clothesmaker as they left the town, but they soon went out of range of the magical ability.

He put his arms behind his head and laid back on the roof of the safehouse. No disturbances. The ratman allowed an earnest smile to cross his face as he closed his eyes and enjoyed the sun beaming down.

A vibration from his pocket stirred him from this brief haven, and he snatched the round object from his pocket.

[Progress Report?]

“Everything is as planned,” he snarled back at the muffled voice, stuffing the stone back into a pocket hastily, his elbow knocking his coffee mug.

He watched the mug slide out of his reach and disappear over the edge of the roof, the clattering against the cobblestone road below coming a heartbeat later.

A scowl dominated his face as he rolled to his opposite side, arms folded and glaring away

from the sun - almost shirking it.

Maybe in Galeden, he would finally find it...

The End
Shadows over Helpart