

Chapter 96 - End of an Era

"Tell me, how does it feel..." the shapeshifter continued.

Grugg shivered and tried to push himself backwards, but his arms were numb and couldn't support his weight.

"...to not have my voice in your head anymore?"

The Detective watched, mouth agape, as the grey figure morphed into something different. A burgundy robe led up to a messy grey beard, and soft yet tired eyes looked back at him as Grugg stared at the familiar hat that sat atop the wizard's head.

"Is... not trick?" he barely managed to stammer out, tongue-tied and exhausted.

"No," Bart replied, smiling sadly across his wrinkled face, "it's really me, Grugg. You're a lot more handsome from this angle."

Grugg burst into snotty laughter as the wizard hugged him, and he returned the embrace with his shredded arms. He felt warmth against his clammy skin and realised it was probably some form of healing rather than the press of the skinny old man.

"Rats to this, though," Bart patted the cyclops on the back and rested back on his haunches, "this body has terrible magic capability. I'm not sure I can even 'Pulse you; I'm so sorry."

Grugg nodded; words were hard for him to process. "How?" he shrugged, trying to wipe the tears across his shoulder as his arm hung limply.

"Beats me, possibly one of the least horrifying ways that spell could have gone. Pretty dangerous of me to attempt; it could have even killed us both." Bart looked down at his feet as he sat more comfortably on the floor opposite the Detective. "I seem to have shoved the soul of Blackjack out and replaced it with my own."

"Can change into others?" Grugg felt tired, but the brief healing at least greased the cogs in his head. The spells had worn off by now, and he felt the withdrawals.

Bart clucked his tongue and ran his hand through his beard, the sound of the rain hammering down outside the only noise for a few moments as he thought. "No, not yet. The magic that does that is interesting. As a man, magic was drawing energy from the winds of magic and weaving threads into something tangible. As a hat, magic was a pool of water with no clear form but a granular substance. As a shapeshifter..." he tilted his head and closed his eyes. "It's like a picture book. Currently, most of the pages are blank until I fill them."

"Boring," Grugg chuckled, wincing as his body started to burn with pain. "How get more pictures?"

"At this level, people or things I kill," the wizard grimaced, "Blackjack had enough experience that he could briefly take the form of someone he had seen or met."

"That why turned into Claudia in jail?"

Bart nodded. "I'll have to take some tips from her for murdering," he grinned.

Grugg chuckled and groaned as his body again wracked with pain.

"We need to get you some healing and check up on the others. Oh, Blackjack doesn't have pockets, so don't ask me where he kept these." The wizard held out a wrinkled hand, a pair of keys within. One of them was a simple silver design, the other ornate and gold with a red gemstone set at the top.

"Need to find box."

"We are finally getting close to some answers. Thank you, Grugg, for going on this journey with me." Bart placed his hand on the Detective's leg. "Oh! I can do this too."

Grugg watched, his electric-blue eye widening as the wizard started shrinking, smaller and smaller - until just a burgundy wizard's hat remained. "Can still be hat!"

"Indeed, although I will have to learn Telepathy or something if we communicate with each other like before. There is a lot I will need to relearn; I almost miss being a hat."

"May Grugg?" The Detective asked, gingerly raising his right arm.

"Be my guest."

Grugg lifted the hat gently, his arm shaking as he tried to ignore the pain. The wizard's hat sat comfortably on his head as he exhaled and relaxed his arm.

"There are definitely tactical advantages to this, but at least you can wear something that suits your outfit on occasion. Plus, I can go walk places now. Wow, so much I have missed in the last two weeks."

With a sigh, Grugg smiled, his eye half closing as he considered rest. Despite his selfish sadness over losing the voice inside his head, he was happy for the wizard. Sleep sounded like a good idea; with the sound of rain beating against the road outside, he almost felt relaxed. Only some of that rain sounded like it was getting louder.

"Footsteps," the wizard hissed from atop the Detective's head, "sounds like Guard boots?"

Grugg looked out to the road as a figure jogged by and stopped by the destroyed doorway. The silver armour revealed that it was indeed a Guard and the red-faced man turned to the side and cupped his mouth.

"He is over here!" he yelled before returning to the seated cyclops and stepping inside the building. "Came as quick as we could, Detective - courthouse is secure." He paused as his eyes adjusted to the inside of the building. "Hells, you look *terrible*. We have a medic coming; hang tight."

The Detective sat and pouted, awaiting the wizard's voice that never came. Did he have to do all the thinking for himself now? It would take some getting used to. Maybe all those smarts that had drifted through their bond were lost now. Was he dumb again? Was he ever dumb? Why were the walls shifting and bending when he moved his eye around? Blood loss, perhaps.

Several blurred figures entered the room and fussed around him; the one bent over beside him was the medic with short blonde hair, he thought. They were talking, but it just came as muffled noises to his ears. A warmth came from the top of his head, which just made his scalp feel sweaty. Blinking, things started returning to focus as the medic cast a scroll at him.

"That'll have you up and walking soon, Detective. You're lucky somebody dropped by to give me so many of these scrolls - we don't usually hold this many." She smiled nervously as the cyclops eyed her up.

"So hungry," Grugg wailed. He wasn't losing any blood, and he felt numb all over. Whatever spell was cast had at least saved him from the pain and stopped him from deteriorating. With some effort and worried assistance from the handful of Guard sent to find him, he righted himself to his feet. The top of the wizard's hat caught on a support beam and fell to the floor. He would have to get used to that.

"Oh, your hat, Detective," the medic bent down to pick it up before jumping backwards as a wizard sprung up from beneath it.

"W-who are you," one of the Guard stuttered as they placed their hands on the pommels of their swords.

"I am the wizard of great renown, Barthélemy Béraud!" Bart flourished his hand into the air as he bowed before looking up at the Guard, a gleam in his eye, "And I am definitely not dead."

"Has been working undercover with Grugg," the Detective shrugged, "to punch criminals." He rubbed his sore head, "With magic."

"I needed to find out who murdered my brother, so who else should I ask but the adept Detective Grugg? How is the situation in the courthouse?"

"Er, right," the Guard seemed to relax but still seemed confused, "Investigator Valoth finished off the monster, an' rest of the Nightshade turned tail and ran. Most able bodies are hunting them down still, apart from ourselves, of course."

"Other Detectives, Captain?" Grugg grunted with a furrowed brow.

"Injured, but they'll pull through. We had an emergency triage team in one of the nearby buildings for once the courthouse was secure, so they are all being treated now."

Grugg glumly remembered Patson. He and probably a dozen Guard had fallen in the battle, some civilians too. If anything, it made him even madder at Nightshade. It wouldn't be enough to just clear Helpart of this rot; if Lord X had sent this abomination against them, only by their demise would he be sated. Oh, he still sounded kind of clever in his head.

"They'll be worried about us, Grugg," Bart nodded, "we should go back to them if you're able."

The Detective grunted his acknowledgement and tried to move, his skin tight and sore from where he had been burned or cut. He managed to shuffle his legs towards the open doorway, and he stared out at the rain as he paused on the threshold. He turned his head to the wizard and grinned. "Bart needs to kill umbrella."

Cold rain was certainly less relaxing when he wasn't so pumped full of adrenaline and protective spells. One of the Guard had tried to cover him with a shawl, but it barely managed to do one side of him. If the wounds didn't kill him, he might just die of being miserable. The wizard didn't look any better either - without magic protecting him, his robes and hat had become drenched from the constant rainfall.

"Never thought I'd miss not being able to feel," Bart griped as they approached the courthouse.

Grugg went and stuck himself back in the hole he had made, as it was the closest entryway, and he was feeling impatient - both in wanting to get out of the rain, along with seeing his friends again. He emerged into a sombre chamber, bodies being covered and healing being applied to the wounded. His entrance drew the eyes of most able, most audibly was the red-haired clothesmaker.

"Grugg!" Claudia exclaimed, rushing over to him but limping before giving him a tight hug. "You look like death and somehow smell even worse than that."

The Detective smiled and put his injured arm gently around her.

"Hello," Bart popped around the frame of the cyclops with an awkward wave.

"Bart!" Claudia withdrew from Grugg and hugged the wizard. "Is that really you? But how?"

Gregor walked over and sat on the ruined debris of one of the benches. His torso was bandaged, and he had some kind of salve pasted across the right side of his face. "Did you get him, ser Grugg?"

"More dead than Grugg is," the Detective shrugged, casting a side-eye at the wizard.

"How is ser Hat a real person now?"

"I was always a real person, Gregor," the wizard frowned as Claudia let him go, "my soul is just in... a body now, instead of a hat."

"Convenient," the ratman muttered to himself.

"What do you have to report, Grugg?" Lady Valoth strode across to meet the group. Whatever injuries she had sustained seemed to have been dealt with, and the worst that could be said about her was she looked tired and overheated.

“Blackjack dead, have keys to somethin’ - maybe box?” He wavered slightly as he felt light-headed, eventually resigning to sitting on the floor.

“Amazing work as always,” Peony smiled before turning back to a group behind her. “Can we get medics over here for the Detective?” She sighed. “Rest here, for now. The Captain is allowing me to take charge while he recovers. The joys never cease. I’ll have some Guard escort you home when you are ready.”

They watched the Investigator stride off to bark orders at some figures milling around as a couple of medics made their way over to tend to the spent cyclops.

“Oh no, I’m uninjured,” Bart waved them away, content to just try and wring some rainwater from the hem of his robe.

“I think what sucks the most,” Claudia pouted as she sat on the bench next to Gregor, “is that we spent all that time learning to attack as a team, and we never got a chance to actually use it today.”

Grugg smiled to himself as Gregor rolled his eyes.

“Well,” Bart said, wiping his wet hands on his damp robe ineffectively, “best hope that Galeden has even worse in store for us.”

They all groaned at the tempted fate.