

# Detective Renewall

## Uncut Gems

Detective Runewall  
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*B.T. Frost*

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# Chapter 1

Joe checked himself in the square mirror hanging on the back of the door, then adjusted his hair with a comb. Appearing untidy on the first day as a detective was not an acceptable impression he wanted to leave with the captain.

After assuring that his appearance was fit enough, he shrugged on his blue coat for – hopefully – the final time in his career. A snap of the fingers caused the wide-brim to bounce off the coat rack in the corner and lazily flip through the air to land on top of his ears. While technically forbidden from utilizing magic while in service as an officer of the law, he wasn't exactly on duty at that moment.

He checked the six-shooter in the holster under his left arm, then nodded to the reflection in the mirror. Joe unlocked the door and swung it open so that he might head out and begin the day.

The fates were unkind and heartless as The Crow stood on the other side of the door. She was tapping her foot in apparent impatience. Edith Bellcreaux was as warm-blooded as a bucket of ice. She was buttoned from neck to toe in a straight and outdated black wool dress like some eternal widow. As far as he was aware, she had never married.

The domicile in which he had taken residence seemed to emanate her persona with its drab and lifeless color palette. The wallpaper was a dull brown and gray stripe and it continued on without any hint of a whimsical pattern or desire for flair. The floorboards looked as though they hadn't been stained or oiled in decades, and the trim and cabinetry looked just as parched and lifeless.

Her fingers were entwined before her like some disapproving and grim superior. "Joseph," was said with such a sneer of vitriol; one would think he had just spat on her shoes. "Where are you going?" One ebony and silver eyebrow cocked in such a way as to suggest the question was rhetorical.

Joe didn't have time to play her mind games or subject himself to her abusive verbosity. "Excuse me, Ms. Bellcreaux, but I can't be late for work." In an attempted diplomatic gesture, he lifted his hat and lowered his eyes while attempting to sidestep her.

The overly strict landlady headed him off, and her leather boots clapped into his intended escape route. "You will stand your ground until you answer my question, Joseph." Again, she always seemed to spit his name out.

*So we're going to spar again today, are we?*

Joe straightened and rested his wide-brim back down on his head and squared his shoulders at his full height. He wasn't that much taller than the grave woman, only because she was a tall woman herself. "I'm attempting to head to work so that I may begin my shift as detective. You're impeding me. Why?"

Her cocked eyebrow lifted higher as she made a visible gesture of eyeing him up and down. "You're in a blue coat, you're *not* a detective." Her enunciations were like daggers.

He leaned in closer to her and glared with all the fire his young eyes could generate and ground through his teeth, "I said *begin* my shift as a detective."

She narrowed her eyes in turn, knowing that her attempted jab had not quite hit its mark. The implication hadn't been lost on her.

While she had missed the verbal technicality, the words had still dug into him. The lingering doubt as to whether he was good enough to be a detective still danced about the back of his mind, taunting.

Straightening again, he repeated the earlier unanswered question. "Why are you impeding me?"

The old crow simply stepped aside and maintained her stony disposition in answer.

Joe couldn't help but feel his eye twitch in irritation, and every corner of his mind railed for him to yell. There wasn't a single day that had gone by in the past two weeks that she hadn't tested him in one way or another. He swore she was put upon the mortal world to prick him with verbal needles until he cracked. Thankfully, two years of serving the city as an officer of the law had taught him how to maintain his outward cool in the face of outright infuriation.

The time-keeping partition he had set in his mind began to chime. The alarm snapped him back to his senses. He instinctively looked to his wristwatch and noted that if he didn't leave immediately, he would indeed be late.

Wasting no more daylight on his landlady, Joe took to the narrow stairs at the end of the hall and headed to the main floor. From there, he headed out the main door and down the steps to the street.

Residence in the brownstone walk-up had become a requirement after he received his official graduation papers. He had been a blue coat in the North East district, and was transferred to the South West. Traversing the entire city to get to his new precinct didn't appeal to him. The one-room occupancy, lorded by the detestable crone, was his only option with how little coin he had available.

The cobblestones were already alive with the bounce and traffic of footfalls. It was late spring, and the rain was cool on the skin. Adjusting his hat, he made sure it wouldn't blow off with the quick pace he set. Tardiness was undeniably frowned upon for a first day.

After moving into his new lodgings, Joe had taken it upon himself to test the quickest route from home to the station. Sadly, the route to the station required quite a bit of crossing, as it was in a bit of a kitty-corner direction. Having timed the brisk walk, he was fairly certain there would still be a few minutes to spare.

It was only five minutes in and nearly halfway to the station when he stopped abruptly. Something had caught the attention of his partitioned mind.

A soft alarm was ringing out from somewhere down the alley between The Gnomish Cobbler and Pinkie's Powdered Pastries on the other side of the street. Nobody passing by seemed to notice the alarm at all. They walked on about their day as though there wasn't a sound. Some even cursed him in their passing as he blocked the walkway.

Reconnecting with the partition, he suddenly became aware that the alarm that had been triggered was magical in nature, and a barrier had been broken.

*Intruders!*

Joe couldn't ignore the crime taking place before him, but he wasn't on duty, and he didn't have the means to order backup.

Checking the street for any wagons or carts – self-propelled or otherwise – he quickly jogged across, ignoring

any designated crossings. He was the law, after all. Once he reached the other side, he took a moment to let others pass in front of him before heading toward the mouth of the alley. Rushing forward would cause a scene. No point in alerting the perpetrators when he could catch them red-handed.

Joe waited until he had taken a few steps into the dimly lit alley before drawing his Sprocket & Iron six-shot from the holster under his coat. He wanted to catch the criminals in the act but didn't want to startle any passerby.

Taking a moment, Joe reached into the partitioned half of his mind and tasked it with homing in on the mystical disturbance. Once he was able to prioritize that to another part of his consciousness, he was free to focus on the physical world in front of him. He couldn't hear anything out of the ordinary. There wasn't any fussing or shuffling, as was common with typical ruffians. Whoever was at work was experienced enough to keep quiet.

Sidestepping closer to the outer wall of The Gnomish Cobbler, Joe slowly made his way to the intersection of back alleys. There still wasn't any unusual noise, but the portion of his mind focused on the mystical alarm told him that the building just opposite the shoe shop was the one experiencing the break-in.

The young officer lifted his hat from his head and pressed back up against the wall before peering around the corner. The back door of the opposite building was slightly ajar, and the lock looked to be busted with a few splinters of wood sticking out of the frame.

Looking to the plaque above the rear entryway, he noted that the building in question was a jeweler's shop. "Of course," he murmured his lack of surprise under his breath and stepped out, leveling his firearm at the doorway in preparation.

He adjusted his wide-brim to keep the rain from his head and shoulders, then took a few careful steps toward the breached back door.

Taking a moment, he steadied his breathing and strained his ears to listen for any noises. He could hear muffled whispering and hushing making its way toward him from the inside. A careful adjustment of the partition allowed him to focus his hearing to near fey-like sharpness. There was arguing coming from behind the door.

“Keep the gems out of sight, you numbskull!”

The admonishment came from a rather gruff individual. Based on the source they were likely of short stature. It was shortly followed by what sounded to be a meaty but non-debilitating cuff.

“Ow! S-sorry boss, I didn’t mean to.” The second voice seemed to come from a level height. It likely belonged to someone taller and younger than the first; by the nature of the footsteps and shuffling, they didn’t seem to be all too hefty.

Noting that they were making their way to the door, Joe decided to refocus himself and bring his firearm to the ready. He shifted his weight, paused for the appropriate timing, then brought his foot up in a solid and thunderous kick to the door.

His foot and the door – as had been expected – met a great deal of resistance, as both assailants were struck squarely. Joe took the moment of chaos and panic to charge through.

Shouldering his way in, Joe leveled his firearm at the two individuals that had been knocked flat and bellowed with the aid of his finely-honed powers, “Freeze!” The thundering of his heart only fueled his door strike, barreling charge, and infused voice.

Both thieves let out a shout of surprise and threw up their arms. Intimidation magic tended to have an overpowering effect on those caught unaware, especially when the one throwing it about was fueled by the surge of the moment.

Joe noted that one of the two would-be thieves was a scrawny and ruddy-haired young man in suspenders.

He didn't look to be of age, was as white as a clean sheet, and had likely been coerced by the smaller of the two. The more experienced one was an ashen-gray dark dwarf. They were commonly linked to criminal activities; much like a fox was likely to steal a chicken from the coop.

Joe looked to the scattered score littering the floorboards around his two culprits, and mentally noted the intended haul was uncut gems and bits of unfinished jewelry. A wise target, as they would be untraceable and easy to pawn on the black market. Not a bad ploy, had Joe not been nearby.

The young man shook free of the shock, then curled his knees up to his chest and began bawling like a child. The dwarf growled and began elbowing the young man in the side of the head, "Oi! Shut it!"

Joe cocked his gun with a pull of his thumb. The undeniably recognizable *click* put a deathly palpable silence on the back hallway of the jeweler's shop. The young man went wide-eyed. He simultaneously discovered and invoked the phrase 'silent as the grave'.

"Elbow him one more time," Joe shifted the aim of his barrel to the forehead of the dwarf. "I dare you."

The dark dwarf's arms shot straight up along the floorboards. "I give! I'm not touchin' the lad!" More uncut gems popped free from their improvised hiding spots as the stout man shifted on the floor. He cursed under his breath in his native tongue as he craned his head to see where the gems had fallen.

It never ceased to baffle Joe how culprits kept thinking the way they did, even when caught red-handed.

The young man on the floor continued to curl up tighter into a ball until Joe heard panicked, gasping breaths, followed by the stench of urine and sobbing. Both the dwarf and Joe had to turn their noses away and scoff at the unsightliness of it.

Not a moment afterwards, the partitioned portion of his mind informed him that the mystical alarm had been

shut off. The soft yellow arcane lanterns hanging from the ceiling at the front of the store suddenly flickered to life

A half moment after the lights turned on, a fellow blue coat side-stepped into view with his piece raised. Joe lifted his free hand as a greeting. The white-mustached senior officer straightened out of the gun-ready stance he had entered in, then lifted a hand to scratch his temple under his hat. “How’d you get here so damn quick?” Johnson, if he remembered the name of the officer correctly, had a bit of a rasp to his voice.

Joe tilted and nodded his head to the door behind him. “Was heading in for my first shift when I caught wind of the alarm.”

The elder officer seemed to beam with joviality and marched forth with his hand outstretched. “Right! You must be that new boy!”

“Uh...?” Joe looked to the outstretched hand, then to his own, holding the firearm at the two assailants at their feet.

Johnson seemed to remember himself and jumped to attention, “Right! Get up, you ol’ scallywags!” He prodded the dwarf with the tip of his boot. His bushy white mustache twitched twice as he sniffed the air. “What’s that smell?”

Joe nodded to the boy that was curled up on the floor, silently sobbing and shaking. “The young one had a bit of an accident.”

The silent weeping ended as the young man covered his ears and shamelessly sobbed.

“Might want to find that one an advocate.”

A slightly pitched voice rang out from the front of the shop. “What did those ruffians take!? Where are they? Lemme at ‘em!”

Joe couldn’t quite see who was producing the racket, but based on his time spent on the beat, he had a fairly good guess, “Halfling?”

Johnson snorted and nodded while stifling his own laughter and whispered loudly, “Ankle-biter could be carried off by a pigeon!” He pulled a pair of irons out from under his coat, hauled the dark dwarf up, and cuffed him.

The partition in Joe’s mind was ringing loudly, and a panicked and unyielding dread overcame him as the reality that he was undeniably late for his meeting sank in. “By the stars, the captain will have my badge for breakfast. I’ll be a blue coat till my dying days.”

Johnson let out a barking fit of laughter. “HA! You’ll do just fine, my boy. Not even your first day on the job, and you caught a pair of jewel thieves red-handed.”

Joe felt only slightly relieved. He pulled out his notepad and stylus and began filling out his recollection of the events of the burglary so that he might pass them on to Johnson. “I’ll believe it when I’m not fired this morning. If you hadn’t shown up, I don’t know what I would have done. I have no irons on me.”

The dark dwarf must have heard their exchange, as he barked in astonishment. “What!”

An even darker thought struck him. He leaned closer to Johnson and nudged him with his elbow. “I don’t have a badge...”

The old man’s bushy eyebrows leapt up. “That is a bit sticky, I s’pose. But the captain will cover you; you did good, boy. Now finish your notes and hand ‘em over so you can head on in for your first day!”

Joe looked down to his notes as his hand went about filling in the details. The professors at the Arcanum had told him repeatedly that learning how to divide one’s mind was one of the greatest assets a caster could learn. It had proven to be an invaluable skill. Not one easily learned, but valuable beyond measure.

Johnson looked down at Joe’s hand at work and whistled, “Fancy.” He looked Joe in the eye, as if somehow doing so would gleam some important

information he couldn't have had before. "One of them two-brainers, are ya?"

Joe didn't quite know how to respond to the inaccuracy of the question and simply left it at "Sure." He ripped out the corresponding pages, handed them over, and headed back out the door he'd burst in from. He only hoped that the captain was as kind and forgiving as mentioned.

~~

*Fireballs!*

Joe stood as wide-eyed and ramrod straight as a cadet on his first day at the Academy. A pair of real, electrically-charged blue dragon eyes dressed him down.

*God-forsaken blasted fireballs! The captain is a dragon kin!*

The captain standing before him was easily a head taller than Joe, was covered in cloudy storm-gray scales and had translucent electric-blue horns. Intimidating was about as much of an understatement as saying an active volcano was a bad choice for a campfire pit.

Joe had hoped that he would be given the chance to explain his tardiness, but the sudden and shocking realization that his precinct captain was a dragon kin was more than enough to leave him speechless. His lack of excuse was likely the reason for the painfully penetrating glare being fired at him.

The silence in the captain's office, by that point, had turned itself into an oppressive, palpable weight upon Joe's mind. He was so utterly terrified that he was afraid that any attempt to speak would turn into little more than a garbled bark or a rambling fountain of verbal incontinence.

He was so focused on trying not to fall to pieces that he developed a form of blind and deafened tunnel vision, in which the center of his entire world was a metal

tack holding a piece of paper to the wall behind the captain's desk. So horrible was his focus that he didn't even realize that he had been asked a question until a pair of clawed and scaled hands clapped together directly in front of him, nearly causing him to jump out of his skin.

Captain 'Bolt' – it wasn't until that very moment that he understood the nature of the nickname – let out a brief grunt that Joe presumed to be a form of chuckle. "Ease yourself, soldier." His voice had vast depth and resonance. It was both soft and clear. He could almost feel the words vibrating inside his own chest.

Joe was uncertain as to whether Captain Bolt was calling him 'soldier' because of his service record, or because he was of the type to see all uniforms as a form of soldiering. Nonetheless, he didn't quite relax. He didn't think he'd ever know how to relax in the presence of one that was akin to a dragon. "S-s-sir." His heart continued to hammer like a drum at an execution sentence.

"Take a breath before you forget how."

Joe frowned in thought and decided to actively engage in some slow-breathing exercises he recalled from his days at the Arcanum. He honestly never thought he'd ever need to resort to such a simple basic form. "Yes, sir."

"Now stop panicking. Johnson informed me of your run-in over the Crystalline Network before you arrived." The Captain turned away from Joe and headed back around his desk to sit down.

*Wait... What?*

The thunderously chuckling dragon kin shuffled his way down to sit at his hilariously small desk and picked up a stylus to begin sifting through a pile of reports. "See your way down to the quartermaster to pick up your new armaments... you're dismissed."

"I... it... Johnson." His brain still hadn't quite caught up with what was happening.

Captain Bolt's head was amongst his papers when his powerful voice slowly rose to fill the room in its

calming yet deep way. “Do you have trouble finding the door, Detective Runewall?” The massive lizard-like head slowly rose to pierce him with its electric gaze.

Joe was jolted into action and he quickly and embarrassingly bowed, saluted, and curtsied, then jumped out the door before he could think of some other means by which to prostrate himself before his superior.

With all that had happened that morning, he never thought he’d honestly see the day where his name was prefixed with ‘detective’. Standing in the noise and hubbub of the bullpen, Joe couldn’t help but feel a swell of pride. He’d made it. Through all the turmoil and drudgery, he’d made it. Little did he realize how much he would then struggle to keep it.

## Chapter 2

The quartermaster of any given precinct was located in the basement. Most of the basements in the precincts throughout the city of Stormbay were built upon the foundations of old guard barracks. The stonework dated back to an era when justice was dispersed from the tip of a spear, and a law officer's uniform was a helmet and shield.

Joe was rather glad that the world had advanced to a more civilized era. Some savage races still held to the old traditions, but they weren't ever likely to be seen roaming the city streets. Six-shooters and long-barrels were the new armaments of choice.

The descent into the quartermaster's domain was punctuated by the scent of gunpowder, polishing wax, oil, and rank dwarven sweat. The stone bunker was dimly lit with old and flickering sunstone lanterns. It gave the place a grungy tavern-like appearance.

A square metal cage took up much of the room, and an improvised firing range was at the far end.

Joe made his way down the stairs and stepped toward the large metal cage. There was a small window near the far end. He guessed that to be where he would pick up his new supplies. “Ahem...” He cleared his throat, then double checked his notepad for the proper spelling and pronunciation, “Dwobrom Grimstone?”

A bald-headed dwarf peered out from behind a weapons rack of long-barrels. He had what looked to be a gun barrel and an oil-stained rag in hand. “Aye!” His grin was full of gaps from missing teeth, and he had a wild look in his eye. “Boys call me Grimbomb!”

As the deranged-looking man stepped into the lamplight, Joe was unnerved to see that the dwarf’s face looked as though it had been staring down the barrel of belching cannons. Soot was splattered in an explosive manner, and much of his ruddy beard and mustache looked to be singed black at the tips.

Joe put together enough evidence to simply nod in understanding. “With good reason, by the looks of it.”

Grimbomb grinned wildly and laughed maniacally with a look of wide-eyed insanity as he stepped up to the small window. “What can I do ye’ for?”

Joe leaned against the wooden countertop with his elbow and slid his official papers under the gate-framed window.

The long-barrel that the crazed dwarf had been holding simply dropped to the floor in a loud, clanging raucous. The attention-addled living powder keg scooped up the once pristine papers and soiled them with his grubby fingers.

*Fireballs!*

“Ahh! You’re the green boy!” His eyebrows leapt up in excitement as his eyes darted across the page. “Yes, yes, yes! New things! New toys!” He turned and headed off down the aisles of armor and weaponry and began barking

into the dark. “Vest! Coat! Badge! Boots! Hat!” he rattled off the list as he went.

Joe breathed out a sigh of exasperation as he felt that his time dealing with the quartermaster would be anything but uneventful.

As if to punctuate his thoughts, a belching bellow of flames suddenly erupted from somewhere far back amongst the stacks. Joe bolted upright and immediately began looking about for a bucket of water.

Grimbomb emerged from the darkness at a jog with a trail of black smoke curling off his body. “It’s a’right!” I got it!” He had a pair of boots in one hand and the papers in the other. He made a quick stop at the gate and dropped off the boots and turned back to hurry on into the darkness once again.

Joe stared in disbelief for some time before deciding the dwarf wasn’t going to return and explain himself. It took a moment more for him to trust that the boots wouldn’t spontaneously combust before picking them up. He took them to a nearby chair with the same care one might give an incendiary device.

Before switching out his well-worn Blue Coat walkers, he gave the new boots a once over. They had the city seal of a cloud and bolt of lightning emblazoned on either side, just below the rim. They were well-tailored black leather and lifted to just above his ankles. They didn’t smell of soot or explosive powder, and they actually looked clean.

There was a hint of magic trailing through the stitches and sole. They were undoubtedly enchanted to stay spotless, protect him from slips and falls, and likely any lightning strikes that were bound to occur. He stood up, and like anyone testing out shoes for the first time, paced back and forth to get a feel for them.

*Comfy, sturdy, acceptable.*

Joe approved. It was then that he noted that Grimbomb had dropped off another article while he was

testing his shoes – a paper parcel wrapped in twine. A black wide-brim hat sat atop the parcel.

Fluttering overtook his heart as he slowly stepped toward the very thing he had worked so hard to achieve. It sat there in the light of the lantern like some grand relic on display at the museum.

It was almost tempting to simply let it sit there, basking in the light of his hard-won accomplishments. He paid no attention as Grimbomb returned in a huffing jog. It was several more moments before he heard the crazed man speak. “I’ve seen that look before, lad... take it.”

He looked to the dwarf in slight confusion. “What look?”

Grimbomb let out a roaring belly-rolling laugh. He steadied himself and wiped a tear from his eye before answering with his half-toothed grin. “The look every dwarven boy gets when he receives his first hammer. The look every boy gets when he becomes a man... If you’re here—” he lazily and momentarily lifted his hand and the paper in it “—with this paper, it means ye’ earned it.”

The crazed and explosive-happy quartermaster dropped off a small wooden box and turned to head back down amongst the aisles at a leisurely pace.

Joe took the advice and stepped toward the package. At first, he didn’t want to rip the packaging out of fear he’d damage what was inside, but childish glee overtook him and he grinned as he tore the paper apart to get at what was within.

As soon as it was revealed to him, he loved it. The tan cotton was of high thread count and as smooth as the finest silk. Blue ribbons of arcane lettering were symmetrically stitched into the seams and down the button lining.

He took a step back and pulled the trench coat from the packaging and held it up into the light. It would easily reach to his shins, just as his blue coat did. It was

lighter and in far better condition than the ratty coat he'd worn on the streets for the past two years.

Joe hung the coat on a nearby rack and shrugged off his old one, tossing it on the chair where he'd left his old shoes. He turned back to the packaging and unwrapped the vibrant blue vest that had been included. It was similarly stitched with arcane lettering and would likely do a better job of protecting him than his current one.

A quick glance into the partitioned portion of his mind told him that all the necessary enchantments were in place: fire protection, shielding, magical resistances, deep pockets, and a handful of others.

Hesitation was lost in joy as he quickly swapped out the old for the new. Once he buttoned his new vest, he reached out to grab his gun and holster to throw them back on. That was when he remembered he'd be issued a new sidearm.

Frowning in thought, he turned to look to the cage, but didn't see Grimbomb or a gun case.

“Over here!”

*God-blasted fireballs!*

Joe nearly screamed in surprise, as the dwarf had somehow managed to get to the far side of the room without him noticing. “How did you—”

“Side door!” Grimbomb barked with a sly grin.

A quick glance of the layout of the stone-wrought foundations confirmed that a side door was indeed how the unnerving dwarf had managed to get by him.

Joe sighed in relief, checked his partitioned mind to be on high alert, then made his way to Grimbomb. “What are you—”

A frightening grin, a wooden gun crate, and a target at the far wall was all that was needed to answer the question he had begun to pose to the quartermaster “Never mind.” The gun range had a small table for resting your arms or stationing ammunition. There was even a spyglass for eyeballing the targets after a shot was fired.

The wooden gun crate cradled in the quartermaster's arms was lined with hard-packed scraps of oil-stained rags. Nestled within was a well-polished six-shooter. The stock looked to be carved from dark-stained maple. Joe reached in and hefted the shining steel into his hand to test its weight. He was shocked to find it alarmingly light.

As if in answer to the thought that was just about to burst from his lips, Grimbomb explained, "High-grade gnomish stainless steel." He gingerly took the gun from Joe's hand, flicked the barrel out with his wrist and gave it a quick spin with his fingertips; it whirred for several long seconds. "Perfectly balanced cartridge barrel and alignment."

Grimbomb stuffed a round into one of the chambers of the barrel, flicked the cartridge into place, aligned the round with the barrel with a free finger, pulled back the hammer with his thumb, aimed along the sight to the target at the far end of the room, and fired.

So quick and smooth were the quartermaster's actions, Joe barely had enough time to stick his fingers into his ears before Grimbomb managed to fire off the round. The raucous eruption of gunpowder caused his ears to ring. It usually wasn't wise to fire a gun indoors, especially without the arcane audible muffling provided by his wide-brim.

The wood and straw target at the far end of the room leaped a smidge into the air upon being struck and settled in a cloud of dust.

Joe pulled his fingers from his ears and squinted at the target. He reached down, snatched up the spyglass and peered at the target. "You hit the bullseye!"

The mad dwarf chuckled triumphantly, "Aye! Ye' tend to get good at this sort of thing when ye' do it long enough."

Joe had an unnerving feeling that the dwarf was just as deadly in the streets if a quick draw was required.

Grimbomb was kind enough to hand the gun back to him with the barrel still smoking. “One more thing, lad.” He stepped passed Joe and ushered him back toward the cage. “ye’ll need yer ammunition.” His firearm wasn’t much good without bullets, so Joe followed.

The dwarf stopped at the countertop, reached inside, and picked up the small wooden box he had dropped off earlier. He pried it open, facing Joe.

Inside the box were a few rows of freshly pressed rounds. Some looked rather odd to him. “These,” Grimbomb’s meaty finger pointed to the top two rows, “are yer standards.” He continued with his finger, tapping each row in turn. The next line of bullets was anti-magic, designed to penetrate arcane barriers. The next were tracers; the glass tips held a luminescent green liquid that bubbled about as they were shaken. The last row looked to be made from bone.

Joe pointed to the last with raised eyebrows. The ‘bone’ bullets looked as though they had been hollowed out and were carved in an odd fashion.

It was at that point that the dwarf’s maddeningly joyful grin vanished and his brow furrowed in serious consternation. “Those be yer wailing banshees.”

A very real chill ran down Joe’s spine as he withdrew his finger. He’d heard of them but had never seen one before.

During his last day at the Academy, his Instructors warned him that he may one day require the aid of a wailing banshee. They didn’t have any for demonstration purposes, and so had only explained what they were intended for.

Detectives in the arcane law enforcement were often targeted by organized criminal enterprises in an attempt to prevent any hindrances to business practices.

Due to that grisly reality, all detectives were required to carry a whistling bullet carved from bone. When a detective was in a jam that meant the difference

between life and death, they would fire one of those bullets into the air to draw backup. It was said they could wake the neighborhood with a single shot. Few had ever been fired off before. He had never heard one himself.

Joe appreciated the explanations and took the small wooden case, “I understand.”

His new firearm, thankfully, fit his old gun holster. His trench coat fit perfectly – not that he had doubted it, as he had been fitted for it a few moons earlier. The black wide-brim fit snug over his ears, and he felt all the more like a detective when he looked at himself in a banged-up metal sheet that Grimbomb had lying about.

*Wait...*

“Where is it?” Joe frowned at Grimbomb, then gestured with his hands as though he should be holding a broom.

The quartermaster waved his arm for Joe to follow. “That’s not something I can give. Ye’ have to find it yerself.” The stout man headed to a door adjacent to the stairs heading back up to the main floor.

Joe thought it odd that he didn’t notice it before, but figured it was simply due to the alarming and captivating nature of the quartermaster.

The dwarf stopped before the door and pulled out a keyring, mumbled something under his breath, unlocked the door with what appeared to be an antique white metal key and shuffled away from the door while avoiding looking at it.

“What do you—”

“Nope!” Grimbomb waved his arms frantically as he huffed and hurried past him to head back to his metal cage. “Find it yerself!” The dwarf skidded to a halt at the cage door and threw himself inside, slamming the door behind him.

Joe looked back to the door in question and tapped the partitioned portion of his mind.

*Ah, that’s why.*

It was humming with energy, and the room beyond it was wrapped in layers of protective magic. He could feel the threads of alarms that strung out into the distance. No wonder the dwarf was frightened by it. He'd probably been stung by it in a moment of weakness and curiosity.

Joe lifted one hand and reached out to touch the door with his eyes closed. The door handle felt like any other door handle – simple, brass, round, cold. Just beneath that physical surface was a monstrous beast.

Anyone inexperienced in the flow and eddies of magic would undoubtedly sense a massive, snarling, gnashing, angry creature lurking just beneath the skin of the metal handle. In truth, it was merely a form of intimidation magic designed to deter people from even attempting to enter. Joe guessed that the magic was not designed to frighten him, as he was able to notice the magic immediately for what it was.

Time with the Royal Arcane Forces and years studying at the Arcanum had given him a sturdy understanding and experienced touch when it came to defensive barriers. The one surrounding the room he was about to enter was one high-caliber wall of power. “Color me impressed,” he muttered to himself.

The part that unnerved him was that he could sense nothing other than the barriers. Not knowing what he was walking into, even within the confines of the precinct, didn't exactly calm the fairies in his stomach.

Turning the knob and pushing forward, Joe inexplicably found himself standing in a void of a room. There was no door behind him. There was no floor beneath him or anything surrounding him. It was just emptiness. Was it a trick? Had he been bamboozled?

*Fireballs!*

Joe shut his eyes, fully dropped the partition and opened his mind's eye to the energies of the room. Turning about, he found himself surrounded by

nothingness. He could hear his feet shuffling across what sounded like standard stone and mortar, but he could feel nothing of it beneath him. There was no sensation of the walls or the magical barriers and alarms that should be infused throughout the walls. “What is this place?”

In immediate response to his words, an entity appeared to his left. Joe turned to it, only to find it little more than a free-floating vaporous construct of an idea. The color felt orange. He could not actually see it so much as feel it.

*Curiosity?*

He reached for the vaporous form, only for it to vanish in a trail of smoke.

Another entity appeared within his mind’s eye – opposite of the first. It lasted for an even shorter period and vanished before he could even get a taste of what it was. Another appeared, then another, and another. Each entity felt like a form of thought; they all appeared and vanished in a shorter time than the one before it. “What–”

A wrenching pull in his gut yanked him nearly off his feet. Joe snapped open his eyes and wheeled his arms to catch himself from falling over. Thankfully, he was able to steady himself.

Somehow, he was back outside the door and facing the stony depths of the foundation. The quartermaster’s cage and firing range were directly in front of him.

Grimbomb was hiding behind his counter with his eyes and nose peering up over the edge.

Turning about, he found the door he thought he’d just entered was shut. A quick test of the handle proved the door to be locked.

*Thumping blue pixies... what the devils just happened?*

“Oh my,” the pitched voice rang out from the top of the stairs. Joe jumped and turned to look to the source. There, at the top step, a diminutive figure stood,

silhouetted in the light of the doorway, “that hasn’t happened in some time.”

Joe couldn’t help but dart his eyes from the door to the unnamed figure. “I – that – it – what?”

A bespectacled, white-bearded gnome casually bounced down the steps while Joe repeatedly attempted to jiggle the door open. “What happened?”

The elderly gnome turned his pinched-pink cheeks and a calmly polite grin toward Joe and declared in a delightfully pleasant tone, “You’ve been rejected.”

## Chapter 3

A barrel of questions began bubbling to the surface. Joe was about to unleash them all when the mirthful gnome put up one finger as a signal for silence and chuckled pleasantly. “Calm yourself, Joseph. I will explain everything.”

He turned back around and gestured up the steps. “Come, and do not fret, you haven’t been rejected as a detective.”

Joe opened his mouth when the gnome erected his small finger once more. “The panic-addled fear is plainly painted across your face, young man.”

Despite the white hair and obvious wrinkles about the eyes, the gnome hopped up the steps with the ease and grace of a skipping child. He also bore the tan trench coat of a detective. “Come along!”

With his wits scattered about, Joe had no other option than to follow. Once they reached the main floor, the gnome proceeded to wave Joe onward. With the waist-

high guide in the lead, they proceeded to walk past the blue coat desks and holding cells. Both the gem thieves were in holding from the morning's arrest.

After climbing a set of winding iron stairs, they made their way to the detectives' bull-pen. There didn't seem to be any attention given to the two of them. It was as if nothing that took place in the strange room had been apparent to anyone, or they simply didn't care.

The frustratingly jovial gnome waved Joe over to a squat desk that was half as tall as any of the others. With a snap of his tiny fingers, he summoned a chair from the corner of the room. It did not glide through the air or rub across the floor as he expected might happen. Instead, the chair simply vanished in a puff of bright blue, glittery smoke, and re-appeared in the same fashion, directly in front of the gnome's desk.

Joe had never seen magic implemented in that fashion before, nor could he sense any of it. There were no eddies in the flow of the natural world, nor were there any vacuums created by the sudden absence of the chair from where it had been pulled from.

He turned his attention to the grinning man and narrowed his eyes, "You're a trickster gnome, aren't you?"

The pint-sized detective threw back his head and let out a gleeful fit of laughter, "Hahaha! Brilliant!" He clapped enthusiastically and let out a sigh of exultation.

Joe decided that he'd had far too many experiences with eccentric characters for the day. He tested the chair a few times by prodding it with his finger before daring to sit upon it. Trickster gnomes weren't named such without reason.

The moment he sat, the chair suddenly released a geyser of confetti with a loud pop. Joe naturally jumped from the sudden explosion, only to hang his head in his hands. "I'm not in the mood for this right now. Can you please just explain to me what is going on?" He looked to the gnome for answers, only to find the man kicked back

in his chair with his fingers entwined behind his head and his feet up on his desk.

Joe seriously considered if this was some form of game that the gnome was playing with him. “Why couldn’t I simply pick up my staff?”

He briefly reached out with his senses and felt that the room was still there – deep in the foundations – and it was just as ominous as when he first eyed it. “Did you do this?” Each question that bubbled to the surface made him angrier as the gnome simply sat and smiled. He did, however, note that the smile was fading.

Another thought suddenly emerged. “Are you even a detective here? Am I being pranked?” Joe bolted upright to a standing position and felt righteous anger rise within him, threatening to take over his reasoning.

A tiny snap of the fingers caused a brass plaque to suddenly pop into existence upon the desk, directly in front of Joe. It startled him slightly, just as anything the gnome did seemed to have that effect.

Tilting his head so that he might read what was etched upon it, Joe felt a sudden drop of his heart.

*Oh... Fireballs...*

He had just yelled at his training officer and accused him of being a fraud. He could feel the heated anger drain from his face.

The grin re-appeared. Senior Detective Wadnar Pettlebottom dropped his feet from the desk, leaned forward, and placed his elbows upon the polished wood. “Now, which question should I answer first?”

Joe flopped back down into his seat, his eyes unmoving from the small brass plaque. Party streamers of various colors erupted from the chair this time instead of confetti. He didn’t jump or even notice them until they fell around him and disappeared in a shower of sparks.

While Joe admitted to himself that Pettlebottom was an unusual name, it wasn’t impossible for it to belong to a human. He hadn’t considered a trickster gnome as he

had believed that most fey-born had retreated to their native realm following the War for Silvertree.

He lifted his gaze and opened his mouth to apologize when the grinning gnome lifted his hand to stop him. "Say nothing. You were well within your rights to question everything. That is our job now, isn't it?" His bushy white eyebrows were raised high as if imploring Joe to agree.

"Uh... yes." Joe panicked upon realization of his mistake and immediately corrected himself, "Yes, sir!"

"Pah!" Detective Pettlebottom waved it off. "No need to be so formal with me, boy. I also prefer 'Petals', if you don't mind." He turned his attention to his desk and snapped his fingers once again. With another puff of bright blue glittery smoke, Joe's file appeared on the gnome's desk, perfectly in front of him.

Petals swiped his finger through the air as if turning a page, and the folder flopped open of its own accord. "Ah... Joseph Runewall." He grinned as he adjusted the spectacles that were precariously balanced upon his nose and continued to read, "Approximately 22 years of age. You stand at six and an eighth steps; weight two stone and four pebbles. Orphaned and left on the doorsteps of the Temple of Light and raised in their care until the age of six. You were then in the dual care of the Arcanum and the Temple until you were of age." He looked up from his spectacles, "Correct so far?"

Joe simply nodded as his life was picked apart by the very man that would decide his performance as a first-year detective.

Petals continued grinning and returned to the document at hand. "You were conscripted at the age of fourteen." He took a moment to tsk and sigh. "Far too young." He returned to reading Joe's file. "You spent one and a half years as a Green Coat during the War for Silvertree, through the Royal Arcane Forces."

He looked up from the paperwork and squinted at Joe. "Tell me about that." He genuinely seemed to care and wasn't grinning, beaming, laughing, or prodding for a giggle.

With the same rigid practice that had been beaten into him as a cadet, he answered honestly and succinctly. "Stationed with the 47<sup>th</sup> platoon, Tertiary Defensive Unit, assigned with protecting the medical tents and supply trains, sir." He let loose with the formal ending as it had been drilled into him. "Uh, sorry, sir – I mean 'Petals'."

A soft chuckle escaped as he waved off the apology and returned to reading. "Upon returning to the Arcanum you turned the attention of your studies to arcane law enforcement... how interesting."

He couldn't help but raise his hand, as though he were once again a child in lecture. "Uh... Petals, sir, I understand your need to review my file, but what about what happened, in that room? My staff?"

The soft grin grew wider, "I'm in the process of answering the question. Pay attention."

"Yes, sir – I mean Petals." Joe placed an interceptive partition in his mind to stop calling Petals 'sir'. It was only a temporary solution; he couldn't waste that sort of effort on such a small issue. The partition had more important tasks than remembering a simple verbal flop.

"So something happened while you were a Green Coat that made you want to become an officer of the law."

He nodded again. "I saw the suffering of those in the medical tents."

Petals' bushy white eyebrows leapt up. "Oh? Why not join the medical corp then? Ease the suffering?"

Joe shook his head. "Doctors are all well and good, but they treat those that are already suffering. I wanted to stop the suffering from happening at all."

A wide, knowing grin spread across the gnome's face, causing his full white beard to shift slightly. "Some

might argue with you, that your job is to discover the culprits behind a crime already committed.”

Joe hardened his resolve and sat a bit straighter. He remembered well his instructors from his days back at the Academy, and the staunch ideology they preached. “A petty criminal today may be a hardened criminal tomorrow. Success breeds success and further suffering. Every scumbag I put away prevents further injury.”

Petals applauded him and laughed heartily. “Hahaha! Excellent!”

Confusion overtook him once again and Joe was forced to re-ask. “What does this have to do with my staff?”

“Everything, my dear boy.”

Joe simply sat staring at his superior in abject confusion.

Petals let out a deep sigh, “I suppose you’re not that smart yet.”

He changed his furrowed confusion to a scowl.

Another bout of laughter erupted from the detective. “Calm yourself, I shall explain.”

He let out a small sigh of relief, as it had been an emotional roller-coaster of a day, and they hadn’t even made it to the midday break.

“The room the quartermaster granted you access to was indeed the room you would enter to acquire your staff. Unfortunately for you, you’re not able to pick from those staffs... or to be more precise, there were no available staffs that fit *you*.”

Joe had never heard of such a thing. “Pardon?”

Petals lifted a finger and leaned closer while lowering his voice, “One of the many secrets they keep hidden from students of the Arcanum.”

He continued to stare in bewilderment, “What secret?”

“As you are well aware, there are many different kinds of implements that a magic wielder might utilize to focus or strengthen their spell-craft.”

Children were aware of such things. “Yes, but I used a staff while a Green Coat for the Royal Arcane Forces. Why did I get rejected if I could utilize that one?”

Petals pointed at him with fervor, “That is the rub! What is the difference between the one you were given, and the staffs in that room?”

Joe felt the weight of the scrutinizing mind being pressed upon him. He was being tested.

*All right, I'm game.*

The staff that had been given to him by the Royal Arcane Forces was a standard white oak with runes burned into the surface. As a youth, he couldn't quite sense the difference between that staff and a broomstick, but it did seem to allow him to respond more quickly and effectively when it came to setting out or holding mystical barriers. Had he looked at the same staff again, he was certain he'd notice more, as his senses were better attuned since that time. Joe felt that there was more to the answer than that.

He had been handed the staff by an army quartermaster. There was a significant difference between that man and Grimbomb. Not only were they distinctly different individuals, but Grimbomb was terrified of the door that the staffs were housed behind. The dwarf also refused to get the staff for him.

*Solid clue, but that's not the whole picture.*

Joe crossed his arms and leaned back in the chair as he chewed on what other information he had been given.

Petals said that Joe had been ‘rejected’ and that he had been deemed ‘unable to pick’, that no staff fit him. Such a thing implied that the staffs in the precinct were designed with highly specific requirements of ownership, if not sentience.

Joe shut his eyes and pinched his nose after having pieced the bits together. “The staffs provided by the army weren’t real staffs, or they were of such poor quality that they barely counted as such. The ones held by the precinct’s quartermaster are the real deal.”

There was another round of jovial applause and praise. “Hope for you yet, my boy.” Petals grunted as he hopped down from his chair and proceeded to the stairwell. “Come along, we have work to do.”

*What?*

A tinge of worry pricked him to attention. “But don’t I require a staff to be a proper detective?”

Petals turned back around to stand at the top of the spiraling iron stairs and adjusted a wide-brim hat that had not been in the small gnome’s possession earlier. “You also require a few other things you failed to collect from the quartermaster in your haste, don’t you?”

*Fireballs!*

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“Where are we going?” Joe had to maintain a brisk pace to keep up with the surprisingly quick-footed elderly gnome. They had returned to the street, and neither of them was carrying a staff. That thought unnerved him the most. The true mark of an arcane law enforcement detective was the wizard’s staff.

A small finger lifted in exclamation, “To the scene of the crime, my boy!”

Joe took note of the direction they were headed in and realized they were heading down the path he had taken to work that morning.

Once they rounded the corner, Joe realized exactly what crime they were headed toward: Billburn’s Brass and Gold. It was the very jewelry store that had been broken into that morning.

Instead of heading down the alley to enter through the back as he had done while following the thieves, they took the street down toward the main entrance.

The front entry was framed with glass cases and sparkling gems of various colors and qualities, set into gold. There were bracelets, rings, necklaces, broaches – none of which were anywhere within Joe’s price range based on the tags he saw on some of the smaller items.

Petals stopped at the door, made a slight bow, and motioned with both of his hands. He was gesturing for Joe to step in first. He naturally questioned the courteous offering he had just been given and deemed it to be some sort of trick. After a moment’s thought, he simply gave in and accepted whatever fate the prank-happy fey-born deemed appropriate for the moment.

The door glided open as if by some magical unseen command and the bell above the door jangled, announcing the arrival of a new customer. No trick... yet.

He knew that his senses weren’t dulled or broken, as he still sensed the magical alarms and barriers around the jewelry store, and his enchanted armaments and clothing, but the gnome’s magic might as well have been the workings of a ghost. That was the annoying part about trickster gnomes; their magic was near impossible to detect, and Joe detected absolutely nothing.

With a deep sigh, he followed his training officer’s directions and stepped into the storefront and out of the gentle nip of the spring air. At the very least, it was starting to get brighter outside. Perhaps a sunnier day would bring about a sunnier mindset from all the chaos he had experienced that morning.

A sharp-eared halfling hurried to the front of the store, emerging from the hallway that lead to the broken back door that Joe had kicked in earlier. He huffed and greeted Joe with a worried smile, “Hello! Hello! Welcome! Nothing wrong here!”

For the very first time in his life, Joe pulled the crisp brass badge from his belt on his hip, held it aloft for the halfling to see, and introduced himself. “I’m Detective Runewall, and this—”

“PETALBOTTOM!” The halfling exclaimed, flying past him to hug the elder gnome.

*Why do I bother saying words? Not like I won't be interrupted again... Why don't I get hugs?*

Joe sighed, dropped his hand, and tucked his badge back onto his belt before turning to face the shopkeeper and the senior detective as they embraced. “Of course you know him; he’s the senior detective in the neighborhood precinct.”

Petals patted the back of the obviously distraught shopkeeper, “There-there, Billburn.”

Billburn pushed himself away so that he might look to his friend and gave his shoulders a squeeze. “I know things will be well now that you’re on the case.”

*Hey!*

“Hey!” Joe couldn’t help but feel a stab in the heart from the comment. He paused to think beyond his immediate insult. “Wait... case?”

Billburn turned and immediately apologized to him. “My apologies, young man, but...” He frowned as he looked Joe up and down. The man then pulled down a pair of jeweler’s goggles that had been sitting atop his head and peered up at him through them. “You’re new... who did you say you were again?”

Petals stepped between them and patted Joe on the arm, “There-there, my boy. No insult was intended, and no harm was done.” He stepped onward to begin looking about the store with a critical eye. “And yes, there is a case still to resolve here.”

“But I caught the culprits in the act this morning.” Joe had even seen the ashen-skinned dark dwarf in the cells earlier when heading down and back up from the quartermaster.

Petals turned on the spot and grinned madly. “That may be true, but the case remains open, until we close it.”

It dawned on him then. “Ah... what better first case to close than the one I opened this morning.”

“Precisely!” Petals beamed. “Now, where was the third assailant?”

“Pardon?”

*Please be joking.*