The Unsolved Puzzle

by gryffindorsqueen

Summary

Percival Graves returns to work after being kept prisoner by Grindelwald. But never mind his backlog of work - Magical Criminal Researcher Trixie Barnes needs a newspaper puzzle solved. Graves/OC

Notes

I want more Graves, dammit

The elevator doors slid open and four sets of wide eyes swivelled to fix on him.

Graves only just managed to shake off the urge to stupefy them all and retreat to the empty silence of his apartment. He stepped inside the elevator, weaving through his now silent colleagues to stand at the back. He knew he would hate today; the whispers, the looks of pity, the unspoken questions on the tip of everyone's tongues.
He rested against the cool wall and glared at them. Their eyes all flitted away from him and the elevator started moving again and his colleagues carried on with their previous conversations.

"Did you hear about Annie? She went out for dinner with Cecil!"

"Really? I thought she wasn't interested!"

"So did I, but..."

*Dull, dull, dull.*

Pale eyes peered at him. A low voice laughed.

"You should thank me, Mr Graves. Consider this a little...holiday." A flash of light and the snaking of unbreakable rope around his wrists -

The elevator jolted to a stop and the doors parted. Graves' eyes flew open and was grateful for the solid wall behind him. More people piled in, endless dark robes and darting eyes. He glared as one by one, they all gave him a pitying smile, morbid intrigue in their eyes. He just wanted to be at his desk, work in front of him and Gellert Grindelwald firmly behind him.

Then he saw a woman in a mauve coat trying to get to the back of the elevator. Like him, she seemed irritated by the crowd. But then she noticed him and her face broke into a wide smile. The cold void of his rattling chest warmed slightly.

She clutched her papers to herself tightly and came to stand next to him. After a beat, she spoke.

"Good morning, Mr Graves."

The normality of her greeting eased some of the tension in his shoulders. He nodded to her. "Miss Barnes."

As the elevator moved from floor to floor, the crowd thinned, leaving only Graves and Miss Barnes
travelling in companionable silence to the floor shared by the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and the Major Investigation Department.

"I'm glad you're back." She said suddenly. "There's a rune riddle in *The New York Ghost* I've been stuck on for days. I'm starting to think it's impossible."

His mouth almost twitched into a smirk. It was about as close as he ever got. "I'll take a look."

"Good." She smiled and added, "I've already left it on your desk." The doors opened and he let her step out first. She rearranged her papers in her arms. "Have a good day, Mr Graves."

And with that, she disappeared off to her desk, the light scent of rose in her wake. He straightened his scarf and began to tread the familiar path to his own desk.

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Trixie Barnes wasn't fussy about working in a mess.

Which was a relief because it seemed that over the weekend everyone had dumped their files, memos and half-finished scraps of reports on her desk. She spent all morning and part of her lunch working through them, sorting out good information from useless and filing away old reports. As the deputy head of the Criminal Activity Research Department, she could have delegated the tasks to some of the staff but she found that there was something oddly relaxing about a steady stream of uncomplicated work.

She had just recommended one research report for Major Investigations when Tina Goldstein appeared next to her desk like a worried shadow, clutching food and some more papers.

"I brought you lunch."

"Oh!" Trixie took the sandwich and apple, somewhat surprised. She liked Tina - admired her stubbornness - but they hadn't really formed a close friendship yet. "Thank you." But she looked completely distracted, her dark eyes wide and her brow slightly furrowed. "Tina?" Trixie put her hand over hers. "Are you alright?"
She blinked. "Yes, yes, I'm fine! It's just...Graves."

Trixie's stomach dropped a little as she bit into the apple. "Why? What? Is he alright?"

Tina bent over and lowered her voice conspiratorially. "Oh, he's the same as always. Intimidating but mostly quiet...except when he yells." Tina slumped before shaking the thought off. "It's just that after Grindelwald, none of us know what to do. Earlier, Sam tried to ask if he had recovered but Graves just shouted that he should get back to work! No one dared to bring it up again. But if we don't bring it up...oh, I don't know! There's an atmosphere."

Ah.

"And we thought about getting him something, you know?" Tina worried her bottom lip. "A welcome back present. But..." She seemed to be searching Trixie's face for help. "We don't know what he likes! I mean, does he really like anything?"

'He likes fruit pies, iced coffee, word puzzles, rune riddles, expensive scarves...’ But Trixie could guess what he would really want. "I think not making a fuss would be the best gift any of us could give him. You know he just likes to get on with his work. I suggest that everyone tries to make everything run as smoothly as possible."

Tina nodded and some of the panic seemed to have drained out of her. It still amused Trixie to see the fear some of her colleagues felt over Percival Graves; he was an imposing man with an impressive heritage and a certain sternness that tended to make people uneasy.

"Just get on with our work, right. Yes. Good. Thank you." Tina turned to leave but stopped herself quickly. "Oh, these are for you. Some requests for information and a...copy of The New York Ghost."

Trixie smiled at her confused face. "Don't worry, it makes sense to me."

"Oh, good. Well, then. Thanks for the advice!" Tina smiled and Trixie felt a rush of affection for her. It was sweet of her and the others to worry about Graves. She watched her start to make her way back to Major Investigations when a sudden thought started niggling at her. She called out,
"Tina? Why did you come to me about this?"

She shrugged. "You were the only person I could think of that actually spoke to him."

Oh.

She glanced down at the edition of The New York Ghost Tina had left on her desk. There, on page twenty, was the answer to last Wednesday's rune riddle. Solved just like that. The man was a marvel. Then she noticed he had written something in the small white space at the edge of the page:

Difficult but not impossible. You did most of the work, I just took the last glory rune. - P

She brushed her finger over the 'P'. There was something about him using his first initial that touched her. She had never called him by his first name and he had never used hers. Subconsciously or not, he had made their friendship feel more intimate and there was a strange jolt of excitement in her stomach. It was a feeling of accomplishment, she told herself. She had achieved the impossible by getting even slightly close to him but that was it. Nothing more than that.

She put the paper aside and carried on with her work but a smile lingered on her face all afternoon.

The sun had long set over New York when Graves made his way to the elevator again. He didn't relish the prospect of going home to his apartment filled with nothing but haunting memories of half-lucid weeks stretching on and on with no hope of rescue -

"Oh! You're late going home, Mr Graves."

Out of nowhere, there she was. Images of Grindelwald's pale eyes retreated. He stood a little taller when he answered. "As are you, Miss Barnes."

"I had a lot to do, Mr Graves." The elevator arrived with a ping and, again, he let her step in before him. Despite the spaciousness inside, they stood almost shoulder to shoulder. A silence fell over them and not for the first time, he was grateful that she didn't need to fill the quiet with unnecessary chatter.
"How long did it take you to suss out that rune riddle?" She asked suddenly, still staring ahead at the closed doors.

"Honestly?"

"Honestly."

"Less than ten minutes."

She whistled, seemingly half annoyed and half impressed but smiling all the same. "Ok, I'll have to concede on this one. That is impressive."

He knew she was only his colleague and it was only a stupid puzzle, but her compliment caused a swell of pride in his chest all the same. "Like I said, you did most of the work."

"Well, obviously. You couldn't have done it without me."

He raised his eyebrows at her playful tone and she laughed. The elevator doors opened and she stepped out - only to stop again. She turned and looked him in the eyes, jolting him to a halt too. For the first time in a long time, she seemed hesitant with him. But her chin was up and her eyes locked on his.

She said quietly, "It really is good to have you back."

He didn't know what to say. Instead of trying to find suitable words, he just nodded his appreciation. Mercifully, she didn't appear to have expected anything more. She just smiled, her cheeks turning slightly pink.

"Well - "

"Trix! There you are!" A man - her man - was stood in the foyer, all baker-boy hat, loose tailored suit and dazzling grin. "Come on - the show'll be starting."
She turned that warm smile onto him instead. "Coming, Bobby!" She glanced over her shoulder. "Good night then, Mr. Graves."

And then she was gone with the sound of heels on the marble floor and laughter echoing in the empty, cavernous lobby. His last glimpse was her arm slipping through his as they Apparated into nothing. Off to a show, off to dinner, off to laugh and talk and be merry.

He made his way through the silent hall and toward home.

"Good night, Miss Barnes."

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