

Turn the Page

Rob Steel (Herald of the New Day, Lord of Men, and Gulf Territorial Prisoner #52317) believed that his men would rescue him, right up to the moment of his hanging.

Although I'm not sure, because I couldn't see his face. I had insisted on him being allowed a hood. And a gallows, for that matter. The judge was all for just stringing the warlord up, but I had argued her down.

Convincing the executioner to ensure Steel's neck was properly snapped was a harder sell. I eventually had to point out that at least that way he'd know that Steel was properly dead.

We're still working on a proper protocol for hangings. For the crowd, I mean. You can't let them throw a party, but when somebody like Steel's the main event, you get an audience. The Territorial Police typically give spectators five minutes to get a good stare at the swinging corpse, then make 'em disperse, but I didn't feel like waiting that long. I was done with this case.

Well, almost.

Steel's prosecuting attorney was waiting for me at the bottom of Hangman's Hill. "He's dead, then?" Helena asked. "Didn't want to go up. I would have gloated." "Really?" I shook my head. "I wouldn't have thought that about you, though."

"Oh, not in public. Just in my head." She snorted. "That bastard deserved worse than a noose."

Helena and I started walking towards our offices. Around us the world darkened, in that special post-electrical way you get in late, wet November. It was quiet, too. The salvage crews had knocked off early for the hanging, and tomorrow was Saturday. It was nice to have weekends again. I had missed them.

"You're not wrong," I admitted. "He's lucky we caught him last month, instead of during the Collapse. Things back then" - a sudden recollection of me in stinking rags, bloody and bruised, pounding a rock into the back of a fallen raider's skull - "could get rough."

Helena's mouth worked. I wondered if she also just had an old memory show up and scream at her. "That's behind us now. 'No shame for surviving,' sure, but 'turn the page.'"

“No shame for surviving,” I echoed. I wondered if everybody had trouble sometimes believing the slogan.

“Anyway, you did a good job,” Helena told me. “I know it’s hard to defend these people, in more ways than one. But you’ve always stepped up for it.” She smiled. “You even manage to save some of them, which weirdly makes me feel better, you know? Like we’re actually following the old rules, instead of just giving them lip service.”

“We’d better,” I replied, letting my tone go dry. “We need stuff like rule of law, if the Territory wants to rejoin the country as a state. That’s why I’m defending these people,” I lied. “Because we all need to know that justice never died, even during the Collapse. It just wasn’t here. And now it’s back.”

Helena shook her head as we passed through the security gate for Capitol House. I do like the chain link better than those crazy makeshift walls we put up at the start. It’s far too soon to relax, but I like them. “I’m so glad you’re okay with doing this, because I couldn’t,” she admitted. “Too many old wounds. Good thing you’re past all that.” I smiled, and didn’t tell her that I was not.

My office is also my apartment. When 'defensible' suddenly becomes the most valuable feature in real estate, you learn to work from home. It was also just me there, because - Helena to the contrary - not everybody wants raiders and warlords to have lawyers. There hasn't been anyone else in my life since the Collapse, either. One reason I'm doing what I'm doing.

So there was nobody there to see me pull out a thin pile of papers from my coat. You want to hide subversive literature in plain sight? Give it to a lawyer. Even now, we've got more paperwork than we can handle.

I carefully read it all. From what I could tell, Rob Steel's last manifesto was the real deal. He'd been cagy about what he'd done before the Collapse, but if it wasn't in marketing then he'd wasted his talents. It was all in there: Rob's beliefs, his arguments, his justifications for every horrible thing that he'd ever done to try to take over the Gulf Coast.

It was good propaganda, too. You could see from this last gasp the mind and the will that had given the Gulf Territory hell. Reading this would make his remaining supporters out there ready to start it all up again, only even harder.

And I was the only one who knew he'd been this good at agitprop, because I was the only one in the Territorial government who talked to the man for more than ten minutes at a time. If they had known, I'd never have been allowed to leave Hangman's Hill without being searched.

Rob knew it, too. He had smirked when he slipped the manifesto to me, during our last private conference. "Lawyer-client privilege," he had said before they gagged and masked him. "Not that you'll need it."

I contemplated the manifesto, then threw it in the fire with a sigh. He really did think somebody would rescue him. My fault; I certainly encouraged him to think that.

I wanted to feel bad about making him believe - making them all believe - I'd get their messages through, like some radical lawyers did before the Collapse. I wanted to, but I didn't. What I wanted was for them to be properly hanged. That's why I took the hopeless cases. They were hopeless for a reason, and I wanted to keep them that way.

Yeah, that's not how we're supposed to do things. We're supposed to act like we did before the Collapse.

But you know what they say: 'turn the page.'

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