



THE INCREDIBLE ADVENTURES OF
VAN HELSING



Calabash

A VAN HELSING ADVENTURE

An original Halloween special short story
based on the best-selling Action RPG

Story by
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Original Characters by
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“Calabash” is a standalone short story set in the universe of the video game The Incredible Adventures of Van Helsing, developed by NeocoreGames. The game follows the adventures of young Van Helsing (son of the famous monster hunter from Bram Stoker’s Dracula) and his ghost companion, Lady Katarina. This story serves both as a prequel to the original game’s story and as a Halloween special. If you haven’t played the games, the story will be still enjoyable.

That said, if you enjoy this story, you can check out the video game series as well: it consists of three games and a Final Cut (which includes the three main games). You can look them up on Steam or GOG.com, or visit www.neocoregames.com for further information. These games are currently being released on Xbox One and in development for PlayStation 4 as well.

Credit goes to Viktor Juhász, lead narrative designer for creating original characters, story and setting for the game. Additional thanks to all the developers of the game, too many to list them here, and a special thanks to Cseperke Papp for creating the cover design of this ebook (based on the original cover artwork of the game).

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CALABASH

A Van Helsing Adventure

by

Balázs Farkas

based upon

The Incredible Adventures of Van Helsing

by NeocoreGames



The house was full of strange, alien smells.

On the shelves there was a collection of jars, presumably full of spices, garlic and dried flowers, which attracted different kinds of insects: they were all buzzing around (which was odd considering it was late fall). A fountain of sorts was operating near the alchemy table. That old woman in the rocking chair by the fireplace seemed quite dead compared to this lively environment, so it came as a surprise that she opened her eyes and bellowed:

“Young Van Helsing! You came after all!”

The young man stepped closer and waved a hand.

“Merely a detour,” he said. “I’m heading south, but I can still help out an old friend of my father.”

He was actually reluctant. He has visited Mama Dahlke only once with his father, a long time ago, but that left an unpleasant memory. The crone looked as if she hasn’t aged a year. She still looked like a two hundred year old woman.

“Come closer! Let me have a look at you! A fashionable hat, but why are you wearing that hideous mask?”

Van Helsing removed it.

“I noticed that I’m breathing heavier when I’m around... pine trees,” he explained. “I don’t know why. This helps. Most of the time”

Mama Dahlke squirmed in her chair.

“I see. There are two traveling doctors in town, if you wish to consult them. Von Pirquet and Schick. But nothing beats Mama Dahlke’s finest concoctions. I shall look for a thing, and maybe a stuff.”

“Actually, I’m in a hurry,” Van Helsing said. “In your letter you mentioned certain disturbances around your town. Care to specify?”

Her face grew dark.

“A terrible curse befell our town, young man,” she said. “Terrible as the night. Grim disappearances.”

Van Helsing fingered his belt impatiently.

“Meaning...?”

“They’re taking away the treats.”

“The... what?”

“All of them! The chestnuts! Sweet potatoes! Fresh rolls! Oranges! A very fine silver chocolate pot from the mayor. It was filled! I mean the whole damn thing! They’re all gone!”

Van Helsing stared at her.

“You called a monster hunter... to investigate disappearances... of *candy*?”

Mama Dahlke frowned.

“Now, only a monster would do such thing, wouldn’t it?”

“Or... kids?”

“I’ll explain. All Hallow’s Eve is coming. The treats are part of a tradition. A child would cause a small trouble, but that’s the thing. Our problem is on a much bigger scale. There’s also the matter with Diamanti. A scientist, living in the Ashen Manor. He’s experimenting with something vile. I’ve seen that he raised the Pumpkinfolk to guard his place, and he’s definitely up to something. I would suspect that he’s behind it all. But to get to him, you might need to deal with his army first.”

“Smashing pumpkins? Fits my mood.”

“Don’t joke about this, Van Helsing. This story is *complicated*.”

Indeed, there was something more, he was sure of it. Maybe Mama Dahlke excessively exaggerated this mischief with the candy and drew hasty conclusions. It didn’t mean that there wasn’t a problem, it merely showed that she couldn’t tell it properly. That was the sign of age.

She took a breath and continued:

“I requested your wits because I fear that this Diamanti might have unleashed something more sinister than just the Pumpkinfolk. Even more... just right now... suddenly... I feel a presence. Haunting you. Following you. A ghostly presence.”

“Ah, I... that might be... unrelated,” Van Helsing said. “She’s my companion.”

Mama Dahlke peered around.

“I don’t see nothing,” she said.

“Just... trust me on this. Look, I’ll stay for a day or two. I might as well investigate these... events you’re talking about, if you really insist. But if I deem your problem unworthy of my skills, I won’t bother. Fair deal?”

“The deal is not mine to make, you should speak with the Clerk. He’ll be available in the morning, until then... you should rest. I see that you’re tired.”

“Yes. I’ll do that.”

Van Helsing turned around to exit the house, but Mama Dahlke stood up and said:

“Something else, young lad. Come closer.”

Reluctantly, he did.

“I am going to give you a blessing,” the old woman said.

“What? No. Leave me be.”

“I can make a blessing with soot or ash. Depending on your destination.”

Van Helsing sighed.

“After this? I’m heading to Borgovia. But...”

“That’s a whole different story. I have parsley, sage, rosemary and...”

“I don’t require a blessing, thanks. I’m already blessed with a pistol. And another.”

Mama Dahlke insisted on giving a blessing nonetheless.

Eventually Van Helsing stepped out of the house. It was growing dark, but he could still see the Alpine peaks around the town, lost in the clouds. An isolated place for sure, and Mama Dahlke’s lodge was even farther away from the town, near the edge of the woods.

He felt a familiar, chilling sensation. The weather was already cold, but this wasn’t just the wind. He turned around, looking for a recognizable shape between the trees.

“Did you find out anything?,” Van Helsing asked.

Lady Katarina’s ethereal, transparent figure emerged from the mist. She rested her hand on her hip.

“Yes. People are easily scared.”

*

There is a certain advantage to having a ghost for a companion, although it can make things awkward as well.

For a while, Van Helsing struggled with his personal feelings about Katarina, mostly because he couldn't quite grasp how actually a ghost experiences the world. How the passage of time affects her, for instance. She didn't need any sleep, but Van Helsing did. Did she get bored at night? Was she eager about their adventures?

He didn't want to ask these questions. As he prepared to sleep in the neatly furnished inn, he wondered about this nonetheless.

Not for long, though. He fell asleep very fast and in a moment, it was morning already. He didn't feel rested at all. The journey had been tiresome with not much chance to stop.

Outside, Katarina was hovering with a joyfulness of a child.

"Did you know, that this inn was built upon an old cemetery?" she mused. "The stories I could tell!"

"I fail to see why that would be relevant to my interests, but I'm glad you've had a great night."

"Some folks don't even realize they're dead. Imagine that."

Van Helsing didn't reply.

"What's wrong? Bad mood?"

"There are literally no people out here," he said. "I need to find a town clerk or something."

"That tall building there." Katarina pointed towards the house. "See? You would be lost without me. Lost, desperate and bitter."

Van Helsing closed his eyes for a second.

"I'm... sorry, it's just... I'm very tired."

"Already? We've not even reached Borgovia."

"One more reason to get on with this investigation as quickly as possible."

"You know, you could just... skip it."

"Not a chance. I'm a completionist."

At least this was true. And maybe the reason for his tiredness.

Their next destination was the town hall. It had a small tower on top of it, with a clock showing the time. The door wasn't closed, but the building seemed abandoned. Only a tall, skinny man stood beside a counter of sorts, with a thin, curly mustache and a suit in a strikingly deep blue color.

"May I assist you, sir?" he asked.

Van Helsing stepped closer.

"Are you a town clerk?"

"Not quite. I'm *the* Clerk. With a capital C. The one and only."

Judging by his voice, he seemed a tad offended by this mistake.

"I see," Van Helsing said. "I was told that I need to speak with you. I'm here to investigate certain disturbances in the area. I've received a letter from Cornelia Dahlke, and..."

"Yes, yes." The man waved impatiently. "It's most unfortunate that the constable hasn't shown any effort in this matter, so I'm not against hiring thugs like you. For now."

Now Van Helsing felt offended.

"Thugs? I'm a *professional* monster hunter. This includes any kind of supernatural phenomena, really, and cases involving mysterious circumstances..."

“Yes, yes, moving on. I know you, at least know of your father, and I assume everything Mama Dahlke said is true.”

“What do you mean?”

“That if it turns out that this Diamanti and his monstrosities are behind our troubles, you’ll be able to deal with them.”

“In theory, yes.”

“Now we didn’t request a theoretical monster hunter, did we?”

For a second, Van Helsing thought he should leave immediately. Just turn around, and leave, and never look back.

“No. No, you’re right,” he said finally. “I’m a monster hunter. If there’s a monster involved... I’ll just... hunt it for you. Fair deal?”

“Now then.” The Clerk opened a huge folder with neatly arranged papers in it. He raised his pen, and pointed at one of the empty lines. “Would you say, that this... uh... monster hunting profession is a contract work?”

“I suppose.”

The Clerk jotted down a note.

“And about your payment... when hunting these monsters... do you usually take any valuables from the deceased?”

Van Helsing shrugged.

“If there’s loot, I take what’s useful. Yes.”

The Clerk paused, then scribbled again.

“I see. So about this *loot*. Do you intend to pay taxes after them in the country of your mission or the country of your residence?”

Van Helsing stared at him.

“What?”

The Clerk sighed impatiently.

“Do you, Van Helsing, pay taxes *at all*? Or you just take whatever you wish and act like nothing ever happened?”

“I usually trade them for useful tools and supplies as soon as I can.”

The Clerk wetted his lips.

“I’ll just pretend I did not hear *that*,” he said. “Medieval customs, such as bartering is frowned upon around here. In any case... we could make an exception. They cover your expenses?”

“Sometimes.”

“M-hm. So technically you don’t require any additional payment, if there’s... *loot* to be found.”

“Are you saying...”

The Clerk looked up, and said firmly:

“*Think*... of the children. They’re the real victims here. They worked and studied hard to convince their parents to get all those sweets for the holiday. Do you honestly want to extort *more* money from them?”

Actually, his pouch felt a little bit light at the moment. It contained maybe enough money to get to Borgovia (but that was questionable), and some useless trinkets from his previous adventures, including a seemingly unfoldable Tarot card, a bone-carved coin and a mute

whistle – none of them were worth anything, even if barter wasn't a *medieval custom* around here.

“Oh, what the hell,” he said. “Just tell me what to do.”

The Clerk smirked.

“For now, not much. Just wait until I draft the contract and I suppose we'll need two witnesses, don't we? And a stamp from the Bureau. Maybe a different ink, this one is dried up, I think. And teal isn't exactly official, although I'm trying to get that approved. Still. The hunt begins! This is an exciting process, isn't it? We'll get it done real quickly.

*

Roughly four hours later, Van Helsing stepped out of the town hall.

“Just... don't ask anything,” he told Katarina. “Let's go.”

Very hastily, he started walking. His ghost companion, for the first time, struggled to keep up with his pace.

“What's our destination?” she asked.

“The Ashen Manor. It's not far away. I tried to make sense of the Clerk's briefing, but it was just too verbose for my liking. But what I've gathered is that this Diamanti living there is some kind of mad scientist and apparently has humanoid pumpkin-headed monsters lurking around his gardens.”

“That doesn't sound suspicious at all.”

“Right. This seems like a very straightforward mission.”

Van Helsing readied his pistols.

He was prepared to meet the Pumpkinfolk... at least what was left of them.

*

It was a rather sad scene, really – pumpkins all around, rotten, dried out, torn apart. It resembled a proper massacre, except the fact that there wasn't blood or anything like that to be found. Just hollow shells, husks, dead things.

“And that concludes our incredible adventure,” Katarina said. “What a pity.”

“Ah, it just got interesting,” Van Helsing said. “I wonder what could have done this. I smell something foul.”

“I can only imagine. I'm just bored, frankly.”

Van Helsing pointed his gun towards the building at the end of this messed up garden.

“The manor's just ahead. The entrance seems intact. Do you sense any lifeforms lurking around?”

“I'm a ghost, not a... ugh, fine. Yes, there are people inside.”

“Are they... human... people?”

“Yes, *mortal* people. Three, to be precise. One of them will be dead in about one hour and fourteen minutes. But definitely human.”

“Do you reckon Diamanti's in there?”

“I suspect so.”

He hesitated.

“So. Do I just... knock?”

“That’s usually how you get inside buildings if you’re civilized, yes.”

Van Helsing glanced around. There wasn’t any movement or any sign of danger.

“Right. Hold your distance. But be ready. On my mark.”

“You didn’t say please.”

“Yes. Sorry. Please.”

Katarina shook her head.

“Every time.”

The manor itself was a two-storied building, quite new from the look of it, a very straightforward architecture, no fancy ornaments or gargoyles or such.

The garden surrounding it, however, seemed like it used to be quite complicated, marvelous and filled with extraordinary flowers and plants – except now they were dead, all dead.

Van Helsing strode up to the simple, yet elegant double door, and knocked.

There was only silence.

He knocked again.

Slowly, the door opened. A very pale face of a young woman appeared, and with a distinct Italian accent, she asked:

“Can... can I help you, sir?”

Something wasn’t right – it was clear, that behind the woman somebody else waited impatiently. He could hear a soft metallic clank, as if somebody was readying a weapon.

“I must speak with Diamanti.”

“I’m afraid, my fath... I mean he’s... he’s not well to receive any guests at the moment.”

“I reckoned that much. Listen, I can see that something mad has happened. I’m here to help this town, and I was given the Inspector’s Seal to investigate on behalf of the community. You have no ideas how long it took me. Anyway, I’m authorized to come back with armed cohorts to enforce the will of the Clerk, whether or not Diamanti has anything to do with this. But he’s definitely a suspect.”

The woman seemed to struggle with all that information.

“Mr. Investigator, I’m sorry, but... it’s not *safe*.”

“Look. My name is Van Helsing, and I need to...”

Suddenly a man’s voice bellowed from the inside:

“*WHAT!?*”

The woman flinched. Somebody tore the door open: a burly, red-faced man with a beard. And a stiletto.

“That... is a lie!,” he screamed. “Dottore Van Helsing is dead, and you’re a fraud, and I must insist you leave my property right now!”

Van Helsing tipped his hat.

“Signor Diamanti. Don’t be confused – I’m the young one. *His son*.”

The woman seemed more lost than ever.

“Padre?” she muttered.

“Well,” Diamanti said. “You talk and talk. I need a more convincing story. Show me evidence.”

Van Helsing nodded. He said:

“Katarina.”

The ghost popped out of thin air, which resulted in Diamanti screaming again, together with his daughter.

“*Mannaggia l’ostia! Che diavolo! Come... ma come?*”

Katarina rolled her eyes.

“So this is how it’s going to be?,” she said. “Whenever we need some progress, you just *summon* me to scare everybody to death? I’m still a woman, Van Helsing, not a warfare tool. This was the last time.”

“Fair enough. But these folks needed a little bit of convincing of my identity.”

“Now, a ghost can have any human companions, don’t be ridiculous.”

“Yes, but there’s the bond that...”

“Enough!” Diamanti bellowed. “Alright. You’re Van Helsing. I believe you. Just... keep her away. Still, you might be just the man I need right now. I really need your help.”

He now looked tired, miserable.

“Alright,” Van Helsing said, glancing towards Katarina. Luckily, she decided not to disappear. “That’s what I do.”

“Then I admit, there’s no complicated plot here: I’m the one responsible for every bizarre event that may have happened in the town. I shall elaborate, if you would like to come in. Just... be alert, this house is unprotected.”

Whatever he meant by that, Van Helsing agreed.

“We’ll have a glimpse at the house before we talk. But Katarina is coming in. I might be the *man* you need, but don’t assume that I’m the most competent. It depends on the case. We might need her.”

“You flatter me, Van Helsing”, she said. “But it’s true.”

Diamanti gritted his teeth.

“Right. Come in, then. Bianca, make us some tea!”

The young woman nodded hastily, and disappeared.

Van Helsing glanced at Katarina. She shook her head.

“I know,” he said. Then he turned to Diamanti. “Show us around.”

*

The old woman was laying on the bed, barely breathing.

Yet Diamanti seemed to pay more attention to the ceiling. As if he was expecting something coming down from it.

“That thing comes and goes as it pleases. It destroyed my Pumpkins, my beautiful garden, but I thought I could handle it. But then... my wife, Francesca. It did something to her. I can’t figure out what.”

Van Helsing stepped closer to the deathbed. He looked at Katarina. She nodded.

“Signor Diamanti, have you ever heard of... the Ink?” he asked.

“Yes, it’s a highly speculative theory,” he said. “Not much is understood about the darker side of our world. But how is it relevant?”

“Well. I’m still yet to see that theory confirmed as well, but...” He shook his head. “Just tell me what we’re dealing with here. What is this *thing* you’re talking about? What creature steals the treats from the town? What has this poor woman encountered?”

“Ask questions later, Van Helsing,” Katarina said suddenly. “She’s dying. We need to intervene.”

“What can I do?”

“Your pouch. There’s that bone talisman.”

“What do you mean? The one from the Artemis job? It’s just a worthless trinket.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“And now you’re telling me this? I was about to throw it out.”

“Don’t kid yourself, you keep *everything*! You’re a pathological hoarder.”

Diamanti interrupted:

“Well *do* something!”

Van Helsing shook his head. He reached for his pouch and pulled out a small coin, carved from bone.

“This is just ridiculous,” he said. “I just... accidentally happen to have something that might helps us right now?”

Katarina shrugged.

“Call it a ghostly intervention. Place it in her hand.”

He hesitated for a second, but then he did so.

“Now,” Katarina said, “I’ll disappear for roughly an hour. The woman will live. Until then... you two consult about this monster. I will learn about something else. And hopefully save your wife.”

For a second she eyed Diamanti, and with a sudden whirl, she seeped into the coin in the old woman’s hand.

“This just keeps getting crazier every second,” Diamanti exclaimed. “How will we know...”

“Trust her”, Van Helsing said.

Of course, he was just as puzzled as Diamanti. Katarina rarely acted so... proactively. Something must have happened recently.

He perused the old woman. She didn’t seem to be affected by any of these theatrics.

“We’ll just have to trust her,” he reiterated. “Now we wait for her return. Until then... explain everything to me.”

*

Bianca served them tea and biscuits, then she disappeared again, as if she was ashamed of herself.

It seemed that Diamanti didn’t appreciate anything that his daughter did, he hasn’t even looked at her. This was all very uncomfortable for Van Helsing, but at the moment, there were more important questions to be answered.

Still, Diamanti went on and on about himself for a couple minutes. About his scientific achievements, his publications, everything. Rarely anything definite, so Van Helsing could

only guess what Diamanti was experimenting with, which was always a slightly troubling detail for a man in the monster-hunting profession.

“But I’m not evil, you see,” the scientist was saying. “People give me a hard time up here, comparing my work Fulmigati’s.”

Van Helsing looked up from his cup.

“And who would be this Fulmigati? Should I be familiar with the name?”

Diamanti shrugged. He looked slightly surprised.

“I thought that... Doesn’t matter. He is a scientist like me. Same university. Different department.”

“I see. What’s your trade?”

“Botany. And a little bit of phytognomy. The... alchemy of the plants, so to speak. I *raise* them. Summoning their true form, their most potent consciousness. A transition, so to speak. Recently, the *cucurbitales*.”

“So if I understand correctly... you create monsters. From pumpkin.”

“That’s an overstatement. Eh, sort of. I can do that with squash, watermelon, anything really. But it’s the hour of the pumpkin, and All Hallow’s Eve was coming up... they were scary, yes, but they were harmless guardians of my manor. Really, you must believe. Yet... I made a mistake.”

Van Helsing sighed.

“What’s with you scientists and that line? That’s just about how every monster hunt begins.”

“Yes, well. I can see that now.”

“What went wrong?,” Van Helsing asked.

“It was a coincidence. There was this time when I didn’t pick a pumpkin for my process, but a calabash.”

“What’s a calabash?”

“You never seen one? The bottle gourd? People make bottles out of it. They also call it a long melon. The Hungarians call it “the stealing pumpkin”. Something like that. A rather fitting name.”

“So it’s a different kind of pumpkin?”

“Aaah... very different. It actually requires a whole different process to raise it as a... monster, as you would call it. And that mistake of mine created a *real* monster. This one Calabash does actually steal. It’s unstable, so it needs energy to maintain it’s rather undeveloped form. It looks like a spider with its long, thin legs, and it has long, pipelike organ with a... a tongue. It needs to suck out carbohydrates like... ah I won’t bore you with the science, I mean, mostly sugar, starch and such. It feasted on my pumpkin guards and has escaped. I reckon he found this town of yours.”

“What I’ve gathered is that this Calabash stole most of the candy for the upcoming holiday. But sugar, eh? Then what about... blood?”

“I was afraid you might ask that. I don’t think the Calabash is a threat to the people right now, as it’s still a newborn, scared, it doesn’t understand the world. But... eventually, yes. I suppose it will realize that it can feast on people too to regain it’s energy. The encounter with my wife had been a mistake, it wasn’t a clear attack, more like... it tried to communicate, I

think, but Francesca's mind just... collapsed. Even if the Calabash won't hunt for people just yet, it's still dangerous."

"Then we must not waste any more time. Let's hunt."

Van Helsing raised one of his pistols.

"Ah, guns might... not work... on it," Diamanti added. "If my calculations are correct, the Calabash might have... contaminated a larger area somewhere in the forest. It's also very good at blending in and hiding. It lurks behind the trees. It... uh... phases in and out of this world."

"I've dealt with such enemies before. I'll be careful. I have a repertoire of methods, trust me. This monster might have all the treats, but I've got all the tricks!"

The air began to shimmer beside them, and Katarina appeared. There was something different about her, though. She seemed very pale, very dim.

"Your wife," she told Diamanti. "She will live. She needs to rest. But she said that when she wakes up, she will kick you in the behind."

Diamanti's face seemed more red than usual.

"I'll... I'll just stay with her now. Van Helsing, will you look for the Calabash then? It's hiding nearby. I don't know its exact location. Will you find it?"

At least he seemed honestly concerned.

"We will," Katarina said.

"Also... can I take some more biscuits?" Van Helsing asked. "These are incredible."

*

Once again, they traversed the messed up garden, but this time, they headed towards the woods.

"How are we going to engage this thing?" Katarina asked. "I've seen something disturbing when I was away. This monster has infected the space all around us... all the dimensions. The talisman was consumed by it. Destroyed. It would've helped us."

"How did you even know it'll work?"

"Like I said. The cemetery under the inn. The stories the dead can tell! There's a huge catacomb system under us even right now. Don't underestimate the number of informants. Now your turn with the answers. How do you plan to engage the monster?"

"I might need my mask," Van Helsing said.

"You're already wearing it."

"Not this one. The... weird one."

Lady Katarina thought for a moment.

"The one for the elements or the one for the shadows?"

"The latter. I need to operate as an umbralist on this one."

Van Helsing stopped and looked around. He saw no movement. It was a good opportunity. He changed his mask.

Learning the ways of the umbralist took up much of the time of Van Helsing's youth, and he wasn't quite sure he would ever master it. The mask depicted a frightening phantom, so it wasn't charming either.

He equipped it nonetheless. He needed the special powers of the mask.

“I feel very awkward,” he said.

“Awkward beats dead,” Katarina said. “Do you see now what I see?”

He looked around. The world now seemed much darker, but bright, purple highlights showed the trails of the monster. The mask of the umbralist shows the world literally in a different light. But what Van Helsing saw, was rather disturbing.

A very huge area in the woods seemed to be contaminated with something remarkably alien. And a shadowy figure was moving around as well.

“Oh, there it is,” Van Helsing whispered. “This one definitely draws its power from the Ink.”

“Can you handle it?”

“Well...”

The sun was almost setting again. The day went by quickly after leaving the town hall, that’s for sure. But there was nothing else left: he needed to enter the woods.

Katarina followed, but as Van Helsing already observed, she wasn’t quite as she used to be, and not because the mask showed her in different light. The way she moved, the way she appeared... something wasn’t right.

He had to ask.

“Katarina, are you... okay?”

“Why? Are you afraid that I might drop dead?”

“Uh, no, obviously. But...”

“Then be silent. I’ll approach from another way.”

“Another way? What....” He turned around, but Katarina was gone. “Great.”

His surroundings got darker. He noticed a quick movement on the trees, but as soon as he looked, everything was still.

Just the branches creaked.

And something else. A quiet rattling. Soft taps on the trees.

He could hear the monster lurking around.

He tried to draw powers from the shadows around him, enhancing his senses while hiding himself with that same effort. It was a long time since he used his umbralist tricks, so he wasn’t quite sure how well he performed.

He treaded softly, but it was painfully obvious that he made unwanted sounds anyway.

A branch moved above him. And then another.

MUST FEED.

He tried to determine what was going on, but he couldn’t. He raised his blade. He would’ve reached for his pistols instead, as he found them more reliable, but in this fight they wouldn’t do anything good. The Calabash was too close, even if he couldn’t see it.

The branches moved again.

PAIN.

He realized there was something more sinister going on: he could hear the monster’s thoughts.

FEED. MUST FEED. PAIN. DEATH.

“Do you understand me?” Van Helsing asked.

He suddenly felt very silly talking alone in the middle of the forest. But an answer came.

VAN HELSING. DEATH.

“You will stop threatening this community,” he said. “This must end.”

PAIN.

“Yes, you’ve caused much trouble already. I’m here to…”

DEATH.

He paused. This was an interesting problem. What was he going to do anyway? Kill it? The monster was, by any means, innocent in any serious crime. Sure, it almost killed that poor woman, but that was an accident. So... is it really justified to attack the Calabash?

Van Helsing hesitated.

“Just...”

PAIN. HURTS.

The Calabash seemed to phase in and out of the Ink. It moved around appearing and disappearing periodically. It was very hard to behold.

“Stop for a second, will you?”

I CAN SEE. TIME.

“What?”

FORESTS. BEASTS. MACHINES. INK. DEATH.

“What are you on about?”

BORGOVIA. PAIN. DEATH.

Van Helsing stepped forward, examining the trees above him. How would this monster know about Borgovia?

DEATH. VAN HELSING. CALABASH. DEATH. MUST FEED. MUST HURT. PLEASE. DEATH.

He tried to make sense of these thoughts. The monster was clearly in pain, but it also signaled something very threatening. And at the same time... something apologetic.

But he had no time to think. At this moment, the monster appeared before him.

It came down from one of the trees. It resembled indeed a huge, spiderlike creature, but in a disturbing way it also looked humanoid. On his slightly spherical head, a long trunklike organ was pointing towards him, as if the Calabash was sniffing out him with a long nose.

It was clear that this creature had grown too big to steal from the town. It had to change its behavior. It had to become a predator.

That answered his question about what he should do.

GOT YOU NOW. SORRY.

Van Helsing tried to raise his blade again, preparing for an attack, but to no avail: he was paralyzed.

He glanced down, and with horror, he understood: vines were slithering around his legs and arms. And he didn’t even felt them coming.

For the first time, he felt a maddening fear: it was clear that he wasn’t the hunter in this scenario.

FEED.

The vines were coming up from hundreds if not thousands of holes from the ground. This was beyond anything he has ever encountered. He was losing.

The Calabash was towering over him, and there was nothing he could do.

SORRY. HUNGRY.

“Diamanti deserves that kick,” Van Helsing remarked.

He felt his strength slowly fading away. The creature drew closer.

Then it stopped.

Van Helsing regained his senses again. He could swear he heard an otherworldly scream beyond this world. To his surprise, the vines on his limbs dried up at once.

He tried to get out of the way of the Calabash, but he fell, and he dropped his blade.

The monster hissed in pain, and disappeared for a second – only to reappear immediately again.

The monster lost its Ink-drawn powers, Van Helsing mused. How?

The answer was, of course, pretty obvious. He had only one backup plan.

And there she stood, behind the Calabash, now assuming her corporeal form so rarely seen: ready to fight, ready to tear the monster apart.

“Am I late?” Katarina asked. “Or only fashionably late?”

“I suppose you have a *perfectly* good explanation for disappearing like that!” Van Helsing snapped.

But Katarina was now not in the position to argue. The Calabash lost its patience, and jumped towards Van Helsing’s ghostly companion.

There was no sign of weakness on her anymore. Her quite frightening corporeal form was almost perfectly realized, her strength seemed impeccable, she was more physical than anything he’d seen lately.

She threw a punch and the Calabash fell.

But the fight has just started. The monster had some strength left, after all. Losing its Ink-drawn power was just the first step. The monster still existed in this world.

Van Helsing stood up, looking for his blade. He picked it up just in time: the monster was regaining its momentum.

Katarina attacked again, but the monster was quicker. It climbed up the trees and screamed as if calling for help.

Van Helsing suddenly understood: it did exactly that.

From under the dead vines, a legion of smaller gourds were emerging, with their own limbs and screechy little screams. The minions of the Calabash awoke.

“This is more like it,” Van Helsing said, and readied his blade.

These smaller monsters were weak, but moved about fairly quickly and jumped at him from different angles. Fortunately, the umbralist suit was specifically designed to allow more swifter movement as well – this helped him greatly. His blade was dancing and slashing as the little monsters attacked, although he had no time to observe them. He was overrun quickly.

Katarina burst into the crowd, taking out as much little screeching monsters as she could. But as soon as she saw Van Helsing was safer, she went after the Calabash.

Van Helsing struggled to keep up with the pace of the fight. His strength wasn’t restored fully, but he was content that at least his reflexes were working. It was rather a self defense fight until Katarina dealt with that monstrosity.

The fight was over as quickly as it began, but for the first time in many years, Van Helsing felt a bit left out.

Katarina tore the Calabash apart while he couldn’t even look at the fight. He took down the last of the minions, and fell, rolling on the ground. As he stood up, he suddenly felt old and useless.

Katarina hovered over, now in her elegant, ghostly form.

“Here’s a suggestion,” she said. “Why don’t we rest a few more days in this town before moving on?”

Van Helsing dusted himself off.

“Good idea. But what were you thinking? Disappearing like that before the fight?”

“Ah, but I was too weak,” Katarina explained. “Saving that poor woman was really quite a feat. Not many can return from almost certain death.”

“But then how... how did you cut the monster’s ties to the Ink? How could you return so strong?”

“The sun was setting. I returned to the catacombs underneath us. This time of the year, on the night before All Hallow’s Eve... do I really have to explain it to you, Van Helsing?”

“The dead!” Van Helsing exclaimed. “Of course! There’s nothing more powerful than a ghost on this night!”

“Well, maybe an *army* of ghosts. It wasn’t easy to convince them to tear the roots of the Calabash apart, mind you. I had to *sing*. Not one, but *three* songs! They made fun of my accent.”

Van Helsing took off his mask.

“I’m sorry you had to go through that,” he said. “And I thank you. We might make a good team after all.”

“Not a chance.”

*

Returning to the town and reporting back to the Clerk was a much smoother, enjoyable experience than before, as he immediately disappeared to deal with his paperwork. Although Mama Dahlke requested a walk around the town, which was again a tiresome addition to this much prolonged mission.

The townsfolk, as if waiting for this cue of victory, immediately started preparations for the holiday that – apparently – took place this very night. The fear was gone, the lanterns were glowing. The weather was also a bit warmer than the day before, people set tables on the town square, kids were running about, decorating every house and tree.

“I don’t get this tradition,” Van Helsing said to Mama Dahlke. “What’s it about?”

They were now standing on the edge of the town, on the hillside leading up to the Ashen Manor. At least they got a good look at all the festivities from up here.

“All sorts of things. The pumpkin. The dead. I don’t get it either. It’s... foreign. But I brought you here to see before you go on your next adventure. Before I return home. To see all this. How lovely. How lovely this town is.”

“Right. Now tell me this: why did you send me to that obnoxious Clerk? I could’ve just walk up to that manor, in a very straightforward and very effective manner.”

Mama Dahlke smiled.

“You, Van Helsing, needed to learn more about patience. Running around with those guns, you’ll attract all kinds of attention.”

“Then again, there wasn’t any *loot*,” Van Helsing murmured. “I might have to talk to him again.”

“What’s that?”

“Nevermind.”

“It’s a shame though,” she said. “That most of the treats are gone. All the sweets.” She shook her head, and waved goodbye before walking back towards the town.

Van Helsing paused.

There was still something that bothered him, and now he realized what exactly.

As soon as Mama Dahlke walked far enough, he said:

“Katarina.”

The ghost appeared.

“Can we go now?” she asked. “It’s too joyful here.”

“Biscuits,” he said, still pondering.

“I know, I know. They’re delicious. Apparently. But it’s not our main objective.”

“No... at the manor. The young woman, Bianca... served me... biscuits. Sweet biscuits.”

“Your point?”

“*How?* I mean the Calabash robbed this town of almost everything, yet at the manor, there were still biscuits, even if they were freshly baked, at least its ingredients were intact.”

A voice came from the direction of the manor.

“I can answer your question.”

Van Helsing turned around.

Francesca stood there, leaning on her daughter, who also carried a big sack.

They stepped closer, looking at Katarina.

“Dear Ghost Lady,” Francesca said. “I’m forever in your debt. Thank you for my life. Thank you, really.”

“Ah, don’t say *forever*,” Katarina shrugged. “That’s always an overstatement.”

Bianca raised her sack.

“We realize that my father had done much damage to this town,” she said. “We’d like to offer everything sweet that’s left at our house. It’s the least we can do.”

Van Helsing peered at the sack curiously.

“So how did you keep those?”

“I stepped up,” Francesca said. “Protecting my kitchen. My husband likes to keep me there, but it’s still my domain. It’s my battleground. The Calabash tried to steal everything. My will was stronger. Well... that resistance almost killed me. But we saved most of our food. The monster then went on to its rampage against the Pumpkins. It’s... sort of my fault.”

“Now, that’s just wrong,” Katarina said. “You did right.”

“You did,” Van Helsing affirmed. “So what’s going on with Diamanti? He’s not coming?”

“No,” Francesca said firmly. “He’s not coming.”

“I see.” Van Helsing nodded towards the sack. “Let me help you carry that.”

*

As soon as they reached the town square, everybody stopped what they were doing. They were staring at them with wide eyes. Especially the kids.

After a few awkward seconds one of the little girls pointed at them and shouted:

“A real ghost!”

Katarina slowly hovered over. Some of the people backed away. Most of the children stayed.

“Boo,” she said.

All the children laughed. All the adults were dumbfounded.

“Well, this is it,” Van Helsing said to Francesca. “I don’t suppose the folks here will be too friendly to you, but they will soon understand that their beef is with Diamanti, really. You’ll be fine.”

It seemed that people made peace with the sight of a ghost, as Katarina began playing with the children, most of the adults returned to their usual business of decorating.

But before Bianca could take the sweets to one of the tables, the Clerk appeared.

“Ach-ach,” he hurried over. “Just a few forms about sanitation and imported goods, and maybe...”

Van Helsing snapped:

“If you don’t shut up right now, I’ll *monsterhunt* your freakish attitude until the sun comes up. I’ll let your imagination figure out what that means.”

The Clerk paused.

“Uh...”

“Also. I require payment for my contract job, as signed, since there wasn’t any loot to be found. But here’s a fair price: you can pay me in coffee. Hot coffee. If served immediately.”

“Uh... right,” the Clerk said, seemingly struggling with this request. “That seems fair. Right away, sir.”

He nodded and hurried away.

“Charming,” Francesca said.

As they prepared the treats and the mulled wine, the whole town became more warmer, more cheerful.

Above them, a full moon appeared from behind a curtain of clouds. It seemed bigger, more festive. It had a slight orange tint in its shimmering light.

Almost like the color of the pumpkin.