

39 – Nightwork

Ward grunted, driving the narrow shovel into the soft soil again, throwing the black dirt onto the growing pile. The shovel—or maybe “spade,” was a more appropriate term—had an annoyingly short handle and a blade flatter and narrower than the modern one sitting in the corner of his garage back on Earth. “Garage,” Ward chuckled, digging out another hunk of dirt. He hadn’t thought about the little house he’d worked so long to buy since coming to this strange world.

“You losing it, old man?” Grace was leaning nonchalantly against the trunk of a nearby fruit tree.

“Nah, just thinking about shovels, which made me think of my place back on Earth. Probably gonna get foreclosed.”

“Speaking of foreclosures, you’re sure sticking your neck out for that girl.”

“Oh, don’t start with me! You’ve been fawning all over her since she showed up at the inn.” Ward snorted a short bark of a laugh and added, “What’s that got to do with foreclosures?”

Grace made a sound that was half groan and half sigh. “I don’t know. I was grasping with that one, I guess.” She walked around the hole as Ward threw out another shovel full of dirt. “Deep enough, don’t you think?”

“I don’t want it to smell in a few days; it’s gotta be a few feet deep.”

“Lucky they don’t have much in the way of forensics in this world, eh? I suppose even if someone found the body in a week, they’d struggle to pin it on Haley.”

Ward kept digging, thinking about the comment. It was probably true, but, on the other hand, he had no idea what the justice system was like. Maybe all it would take was an accusation and the guards feeling strongly that Haley did it. Maybe they’d drag her down the jail and twist screws into her bones until she begged to confess. He shuddered. “Hope you’re right.”

Twenty minutes later, he was tamping moist black dirt down atop the hole and spreading the leftovers evenly over the ground in the vicinity. He figured one good rain or snow and the burial site would be hard to spot. He put the shovel and rake away, scraped his boots in the grass and gravel, then quietly walked through the house, ensuring he’d put everything back in place and extinguished all the lights. He hadn’t heard a peep from the neighbors, nor had he seen anyone on the street in the neighborhood. He hoped his luck would hold and he’d get out of there and on his way to the southern end of town without encountering anyone.

His wishful thinking didn’t pan out, though, because he’d just locked the door and started down the front steps when he heard the crunch of gravel scraping on a steppingstone. He jerked his head up and reached for the grip of his .357 with its single bullet. He’d just wrapped his hand around the burlled walnut grips when he caught sight of a hulking shadow to the right of the cobbled path lurking beside a dark shrub. Ward started to pull the gun from the holster when, with a whistle of air, the figure swung something much like a baseball bat at his head.

Ward jerked on the gun and pulled it free but had to lift that arm to block the club. It struck his elbow with a resounding crack, and his hand spasmed, dropping the gun. Ward grunted as his arm exploded with shooting pain, like bolts of electric lava shooting toward his fingers. His assailant had smashed that bat right into the bundle of nerves in his elbow. “You son of—”

“Move!” For at least the third time, Grace saved Ward’s ass by shoving him. He stumbled forward, and the bat, coming up on the backswing, just missed his right ear. Ward had had enough. He hated getting sucker punched, and this was the second time in as many nights that someone had tried to jump him. He pivoted on his right foot, stepped with his left, and brought his uninjured fist around in wild haymaker of a left hook. He caught the guy just under the chin, and Ward felt his rough, short beard grind on his knuckles as they dug in, shutting the man’s mouth with a resounding *clack*.

The punch must have hit him right on the button because the big dark-haired fellow fell like a load of bricks, crumbling to the pavement, limbs loose, body twitching in a post-trauma seizure. Ward shook his right hand, flexing his fingers open and closed while he watched the guy flop around. The attacker’s eyes rolled back in his head, and Ward had the weird sensation of feeling both vindicated and guilty at the same time. He’d wanted to put the guy down, and he’d surely deserved it, but he hated to see that weird autonomic response to the trauma he’d inflicted on his brain.

As the feeling returned to his numb hand, he reached down, scooped up his gun, and stuck it back in the holster. The guy stopped twitching, and Ward bent over to pull up his shirt, exposing his pale, barrel-like torso. He had sparse, dark hair on his chest and belly, and there, just below the ribs on his right side, were the dark purple scars in the exact pattern Haley had shown him.

“That’s the guy!” Grace cried, thumping Ward on the shoulder in her enthusiasm. “Look at his hands!”

Ward followed her pointing finger, and sure enough, he saw the black tell-tale stains left behind from working with pitch or tar. “Yep. Dirty fucker was coming here to finish the job, I’ll wager.” Ward jerked the guy’s shirt back down, then reached up to feel the murderer’s neck. He didn’t seem to be breathing, but Ward had never killed a guy with a single punch before, so it seemed a little hard to believe. He pressed his fingers against his carotid, looking for his heartbeat, but he didn’t find anything. “Son of a bitch! I killed him.”

“Shh! The shrubs aren’t very thick out front here.”

“Well, it was self-defense. You saw that, right?”

“Of course, Ward. Do you want to trust the medieval legal system in this town?”

“We don’t know that it’s that bad...” Ward knelt there, in the dark, beside the killer’s body. Haley hadn’t wanted him to kill the guy, not without knowing the reason for his actions. He had to hope Foyle had sent him just like the two who’d come for Ward in the alley. Thinking that way got his brain moving, and he started rifling through the dead man’s pockets. He came up with a pouch with two shiny, fifty-glory coins, along with a slip of paper that read “24 Ripple Lane.”

“That’s Haley’s address.”

“It is?” Ward squinted at the front door but didn’t see any numbers.

“There’s a twenty-four on the fence out front, and the street sign at the corner says ‘Ripple Lane.’”

Ward gave Grace an appraising look. "You can remember those details?"

"I remember almost everything you see. I told you that!"

"Right, I guess it's just crazy to see it in practice." Ward looked back down at the body, saw a hilt poking out from behind his back, and pulled it free. The blade was about eight inches long, narrow, and double-edged. "Guess this is the blade he stabbed Haley and her parents with. I suppose she might want it." He tapped the flat of the blade against his palm while he contemplated, then, sighing, stood up. He tucked the knife into his boot, hoisted the body onto his shoulder, and turned back to the house. "Guess I'm not done digging for the night."

"You're going to bury him?"

"I don't want to tip Foyle off. I don't want the guards to overreact and lock me up or something. Best if he just disappears." Grace didn't argue, and Ward spent another thirty minutes digging in Haley's backyard. He was surprised at how easy it was to dig another big hole. The soil was soft, but not enough to explain it.

Ward had to face the reality that he was not only younger and healthier than when he'd left Earth but also a good deal stronger and fitter. He'd seen himself naked in the mirror back at the inn; he could see the definition of his muscles. He'd tried to chalk it up to being younger and going without any food while his body slumbered, but the truth was, the numbers reported by the hemograph were more than just numbers—his body was strong and quick. He'd hit that guy hard—much harder than intended.

He'd removed his jacket and shirt while he dug, doing the work in his new undershirt. When he was finished, he sat that way in the cool night air on Haley's back stoop to let the heat seep out of his body. He stared up at the dark sky, trying to find the stars through the city's light pollution, but the proliferation of gas lamps gave Tarnish quite a glow. The best he could do was pick out a couple of the brighter, moon-like orbs that Grace thought were other planets in the Vainglory System. "It's really something that the other planets are so close. Well, at least two of 'em."

"The Vainglory worlds all orbit the sun at similar distances. I think I remember reading that one or two of the planets are technically moons; when they passed too close to other worlds in the distant past, they got pulled into a weird, shared orbit where they kind of circle each other as they rotate around the sun."

"So they're both moons?"

"And planets, depending on how you look at it."

"Probably a technical term for it..."

"Perhaps, but none of my hosts were astrophysicists." Grace rubbed her upper arms and shivered. "Brr, Ward! Get your shirt on; you're plenty cooled down."

"Heh, right." He'd stopped sweating a while ago. As he stood, though, reaching for his shirt where he'd hung it over the stoop railing, he noticed a flicker of light in his peripheral vision. When he turned toward it, he saw that a thin, wispy cloud of mana had begun to form above the gravesite of the erstwhile thug and killer. "Aha," he muttered, stepping down from the stoop and walking toward the fresh-raked, black soil.

“What?”

“Mana.” Ward crouched, his feet still on the cobbled path so he didn’t have to clean his boots again, and stretched out his right hand, holding it just above the ground so the cloud of sparkling blue motes surrounded it. He closed his eyes and focused on his breathing, and almost immediately, he felt the tingles as some of the mana began to flow into his hand. As his awareness of the world around him expanded, Ward braced himself in anticipation of the rush and sense of euphoria that had hit him the last couple of times.

Unfortunately, it seemed he was still close to the limit he’d reached the night before when he’d absorbed mana from the guy he’d killed in the alley. Only a dozen or so of the motes made their way into him. He opened his eyes and waved his hand through the cloud again, but that was it; he was done. “Something wrong?” Grace was standing close, leaning forward, looking into his eyes.

“Nah, I just didn’t absorb much mana this time. Kind of like the first time you showed me.”

“Makes sense, though, right? You just got a big boost yesterday. That was after sleeping away a month of your life.”

Ward stood, nodded, and brushed his hands off. “Yeah. If I’m going to advance again quickly, I’ll need to find another refinement, right?”

“A refinement or something like it. I’m starting to learn that I don’t know much about this stuff, either. Who knows what other methods there are for improving this vessel of ours.”

“Ours?” Ward snorted, shaking his head.

“Hey, I don’t make the rules. We’re both in here, right?” Grace reached up and tapped his forehead with her pointer finger. It felt so real, *she* seemed so real, that when Ward thought about it, really let the whole thing sink in, he began to feel a little crazy again. Rather than allow that, rather than dwell on the *person* living in his head, Ward turned back to the stoop and turned his mind toward the pouch of golden glories and the note with Haley’s address.

“We need to head out.”

A short time later, he was back in his shirt, his coat, and his wide-brimmed hat, strolling down the avenue toward the south side of town. He’d added a new piece of equipment to his ensemble—the smooth hardwood club the killer had tried to mash his brains out with. It was pretty similar in shape to a baseball bat, but a little shorter, a little narrower at the end, and a good deal heavier. Ward frowned, thinking about that, trying to remember what kind of wood bats were made from. “Ash, I think.” Ward slapped the club in his palm. “This feels more like oak or something even denser.”

“What are you going on about?”

“This club. It’s hard as hell, and I can’t believe my elbow didn’t shatter when I blocked that guy’s swing.”

"It's the mana, dummy. According to Maggie's thingy, your durability is halfway to tier three. Your bones are hard. Your muscles are strong, and you're just generally more robust than someone like a normal person." She nodded, narrowing her eyes as she looked him up and down. "Yeah. Those last couple of collections really pumped you up. All that sleep back in the catacombs allowed your body to process it. Or did it let the mana process your body? Hah, I don't know how it works exactly."

Ward twirled the club with his wrist while he strolled down the street, and he chuckled when he saw a couple of men cross to walk on the opposite side of the road. It wasn't yet midnight, and there were still quite a few revelers out and about, so he quit goofing around and held the bat on his shoulder. He kept the brim of his hat pulled low as he walked, obscuring the top half of his face in shadow. The city watch didn't seem to be on top of things unless you happened to leave a body lying in the street, but he didn't want to risk people mentioning him walking around on the south side of town, not with the way his night had been going.

"What's your plan with Foyle?"

"Figure I'm about done being jumped by these guys. Think I'll put an end to this business."

"That's your plan?"

"Yeah, I suppose. *I'll* do the jumping tonight." Ward had gotten detailed directions from Fay; he knew exactly how to find Foyle's offices and what the building looked like. Fay had been in there before. She'd lost money at a derby or two but never enough to get herself into trouble. She'd mentioned that—the trouble part. It seemed Foyle wasn't too easygoing on people who were late with payments. Worse, most of the guards owed him one way or another, and they didn't get in his way when it came time to collect on debts, which was one of the main reasons Ward wasn't going to them for help. "Focus, Ward, focus." He drummed his fingers on the haft of the club as he walked, trying to get his mind back on track.

Foyle's building was a two-story brick "shophouse," which was the common way to describe a business with an attached dwelling. Fay said Foyle had a sitting room by the front door where clients waited and then an office down a short hallway. She said there were other doors, but they were always closed, and she'd never been upstairs. When Ward asked her how many guys he usually had on duty, she'd shrugged and said, of the dozen men standing around out front or sitting in the lobby, it was anyone's guess which ones were working for Foyle and which ones were just hanging around for the dubious company.

"Of course, she'd only been there in the daytime."

"Huh?" Grace glanced at him sideways again. "You mean Fay?"

"Yeah. She said Foyle had a dozen guys hanging around when she went there, but maybe there's fewer at night."

"Or more."

"Right. What do you think? Reckon there's a back door?"

"I'd think there'll be an alley. Look at these units we're passing right now." She pointed to the tall brick buildings on the right. Ward nodded in agreement; buildings faced each street, and they backed up to each other, leaving an open alley between them.

"Yeah, we're getting close. I bet they're the same." He'd noticed that the further south they went in Tarnish, the narrower the streets got. The buildings were smaller and more crowded, and it was evident the sewers were a bit more strained—dark puddles gathered near street grates, and the odor was less than fresh. "Here's where I need to go to be reminded that this place isn't a utopia."

"You thought it was? After getting jumped?"

"Nah—before that. When I was fresh back from the catacombs and watching happy families walking past the inn heading to the festival."

"Well, so long as you realize that's not the norm."

"Yeah, I'm getting that. I think I might have been a little buzzed. You notice they drink a lot more around here than back home?"

"Probably safer than the water."

"Hah! Maybe. Oh shit, hush. This is the street." Ward slowed down and approached the next corner more warily, looking around, taking stock of the people walking on the street or lingering near the corner.

"You know, I don't need to hush. Only you can hear—"

"Yeah, but it makes me want to talk, so hush." Ward had asked Fay if she knew what other sorts of businesses were near the "bet-taker's" offices, but she couldn't remember for certain. She thought one might be a tavern and was fairly sure a market was nearby. Ward figured that gave him plenty of cover if he needed a reason to be walking on the street. So, with his hat pulled down, obscuring his eyes, and the hard, heavy club on his shoulder, he rounded the corner confidently, scanning the street and scoping out the scene.