

33 – A Brisk Morning Walk

Ward, as usual, found himself alone in Fay and Fan's room when he woke the next day. He was an early riser, but those two gave new meaning to the concept. The night before, he'd regaled the two women with the tale of his encounter with the thugs while eating a delicious, hearty dinner. Fan had cooked up a casserole filled with bits of sausage, sweet potato, cabbage, and other things Ward hadn't identified, all seasoned to perfection. With a full belly and exhausted from the day's ordeals, he'd slept early and deeply.

Grace was ready to pounce when she saw his eyes open. "You never used the hemograph last night. Let's see what it says."

"Remember when I found it, and you told me not to mess around with it? Didn't you call it 'junk' or something?"

Grace held a hand over her eyes and looked down, muttering, "You know why."

"Oh, that's right. You didn't want me to notice how you took *all* my anima." Ward sighed and sat up on the edge of the bed, pulling his pack close. He dug out the device and, after pricking his finger, dropped some blood into the sensor. A few seconds later, he was looking at some interesting new numbers:

Bloodline:	Awakened Human (ah)
Accumulated Mana:	172
Mana Well:	Copper + 21.22
Mana Sensitivity:	Iron
Mana Pathways:	Copper
Vessel Capacity:	Copper
Vessel Durability:	ah + 44.50
Vessel Strength:	ah + 33.08
Vessel Speed:	ah + 29.13
Longevity remaining:	~64.12%
Anima:	NIL

"This thing is confusing as hell," Ward sighed. "I need a damn manual. I need a notebook to write my old values in, but if I remember correctly, I had more than two hundred accumulated mana before, right? Then I slept for weeks, and now I've gained, after last night, a hundred and seventy-two. It doesn't seem like the numbers after the plus signs equal the amount of accumulated mana I had."

Grace made a humming sound as she stared at the numbers. "It seems to me that now that you are an 'awakened human,' it takes more mana to increase those values." She shrugged. "As you said, we need more information. Still, it's clear that you're progressing!"

Ward smirked, stuffing the device back into his pack. "Yes, Grace. I'm perfecting my 'vessel' for your nefarious plans." She didn't deign to answer, and Ward prepared for the day.

As he descended to the common room, he found Fay and Willard gathering some buckets, rags, and bottles of soap oil. "Up already?" Fay smiled and winked at him. "Hope we didn't wake you when we came to work."

“Nah, didn’t hear a thing. Still planning to head over to Haley’s, huh? That’s really great, Fay.” Ward turned to Willard and tried to make eye contact, but the big man refused to look him in the face. Ward had hardly ever heard him speak. Still, he reached up and clapped the fellow on the shoulder. “Thanks for all your help, Willard. I hear I owe you for the clothes I’ve been wearing.” Ward still had on the rough-spun shirt and pants, blood-stained and torn though they were. Luckily, the sweater Haley had given him hid most of the damage.

“Old.” Willard shrugged, then hoisted a bucket full of rags and started for the door.

Fay laughed. “I guess we’re leaving. Still going to Maggie’s?”

“Yeah, I want to ask her about a thing or two.”

“Well, don’t buy any love potions.” Fay laughed again, then hurried after Willard, lugging a sack of clinking bottles.

“Cute.” Grace slapped him on the shoulder, but Ward wasn’t startled; he’d been expecting her.

“You’re getting predictable.” He went to the bar and sat down, smiling when Fan came out of the kitchen. “I don’t smell bacon,” he said by way of greeting.

“Oh? Is that the only way to bring you to the counter? Well, we’re low on meat; farmer Rhett’s late with his delivery. How about some porridge? I’ll put some sliced berries on top, drizzle it with honey and cream—”

“Sold!” Ward laughed. “Something warm to drink, too?”

“On its way!” Fan shook her head, chuckling, as she hurried back toward the kitchen.

“You must be racking up quite a bill here. You haven’t paid them yet since you’ve come out of the catacombs, have you?”

“No, Grace, but don’t worry—I will.” Before he could let the idea slip his mind, Ward dug two fifty-glory coins out of the pouch he’d tied to his shoulder harness and slapped them on the counter. When Fay returned with his breakfast, he slid them toward her. “So you don’t get nervous about all the food I’m eating.”

“I wasn’t nervous!” She leaned on the counter, watching him take a bite of the porridge. However, he didn’t miss it as she slid the two coins toward herself and palmed them.

Ward swallowed a large spoonful, just the right temperature thanks to the cream she’d poured on top. “Delicious.”

Fan winked and bustled off to talk to some other patrons sitting near the fireplace. Ward finished his meal and was getting ready to head out when he heard the door open and felt a cold draft. A moment later, several sets of boots clomping on the hardwoods prompted him to turn to see who’d come into the inn. Three men in city guard uniforms stood there, and, pushing his way through, was Guard Captain Figran. He scanned the room, then the bar area, and when his eyes settled on Ward, his thin lips pressed into a hard smile as he stomped toward him.

Ward straightened and swiveled some more atop his stool so he faced the captain directly.
“Captain.”

“Ah, it’s good that you’re still here, Mr. Dyer. I’ve come to see you.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. You see, guard Boyle over there, he had an eventful patrol in the wee hours—came upon a body in an alley not too far from here. After he called the undertaker and went back to the guard house for shift change, he heard the tale from one of the other guards that a man had been to this very inn last night, carrying on about how he’d been assaulted in that area.” The captain moved to the stool next to Ward, lifted the long tails of his uniform jacket, and sat down. His eyes never left Ward’s face as he said, “I don’t suppose you’re familiar with the tale?”

“Uh-oh!” Grace said, suddenly standing beside the captain. She leaned close to him and made an exaggerated sniffing sound. “Smells like trouble!”

Ward managed to keep his face from reacting to the captain’s question and Grace’s antics. He cleared his throat and scratched his chin. The truth was, he’d been so preoccupied with learning what the surviving thug knew, then getting back to the inn, that he’d failed to consider how it might look to the guards when someone came upon the dead thug’s body. “Sure, I was attacked last night. One of the bastards knifed me, too. I managed to fight my way free, but they both seemed plenty alive as I ran off.

“Two assailants, you say?”

“That’s right.” Ward frowned and tried to turn the tables a little. “I have to say, I’m happy to see you here. I was beginning to wonder if the city watch cared at all. I woke up early today, intending to head down to your office to file a report. I wanted to know why no one came when I cried out for help. I wanted to complain about how I had to run through several alleys and dark, unlit streets before I got away, and, in all that time, I never laid eyes on a patrol.”

The captain frowned, but if Ward had hoped his accusatory statement might throw him off, he was disappointed. “So you didn’t hit one of the victims hard enough to crack his skull?”

“Victim? Did you hear what I said? The two ambushed me with knives. While running, I picked up a board and swung it around. That’s how I got away initially. I might’ve hit one of ‘em in the head, but it sure seemed they were both still chasing me after that.” In his head, Ward was wondering if he should be making any sort of statement at all. He was claiming self-defense here. Was that even a thing in this city? Were there lawyers in this world? Did he have any sort of right not to incriminate himself?

The captain’s tone changed, and he spoke with an almost friendly air, leaning close and smiling, “Well, perhaps you can imagine yourself in my position for a moment. Here’s what I know: You’re a stranger in this town. A friend you made was assaulted in her home. Now you’re wandering the streets at night, and local toughs are coming up dead or missing. Are you sure you’re not out trying to find justice for young Haley? I think quite a few of us might sympathize if that were the case.”

Ward could see a trap when it was in front of him. The old “friendly cop wants to let you know he’d do the same thing in your shoes” routine. “Well, I’d sure like to know who attacked Haley,

but those guys came at me, Captain. I didn't even get a look at their faces, let alone question them to see if they might be involved. Are we even sure the body your guy found was one of the men who attacked me? As I said, last I saw, my attackers were still on their feet. Hell, maybe they started fighting with one another after I got away." For once, Ward was glad of the lack of forensic capability in the steam-age city.

"Hmm. Well, my guards will collect statements and examine the scene in the light of day, so keep yourself available, won't you? As of today, you're under suspicion."

The statement was vague enough to be irritating to Ward, but he didn't let it show. "Sure. I'm not leaving town today." The captain turned to his three guardsmen. "Go ahead—back to work or off to bed." The three saluted and stomped out, and then the captain turned to regard Fan, who'd quietly come out of the kitchen and had been listening in. "Well, innkeeper. Does your guest's statement measure up to the tale he spun last night?"

"Sounds right to me, Captain. Can I get you some breakfast?"

The captain made a satisfied sound, nodding, and Ward, irritated by the accusatory nature of their conversation, turned back to his porridge and scooped out the last bite. He was ready to get out in the brisk air to blow off some steam. As he pushed his bowl away and stood up, the captain lifted one bushy, gray eyebrow and, smoothing his well-groomed beard to a point at his chin, said, "Remember what I said. Keep yourself available."

Ward grunted an affirmative sound and left the inn before someone else distracted him. He retraced his steps from the night before toward the northern gate. It was barely light out; the air was cold, and he had to stuff his hands in his armpits to keep his fingers from going numb. A thin sheen of frost lined the cobbles, and he almost slipped a couple of times when he walked through shadowy alleys where the sun hadn't yet touched the stones. Still, the walk was more pleasant than the night before—no would-be assassins jumped him in the alley, and soon, he found himself approaching the gates in the high, lime-plastered city wall.

A single guard was on duty, and he huddled under a blanket atop a stool, a steaming mug of something held between his hands. When Ward walked through, looking up at the high stone ceiling, the man said, "Mornin'."

"Morning." Ward nodded to him, then paused and gestured toward the empty gravel road beyond the gates. "This the right way to the cemetery? I'm looking for a woman named Maggie."

"Ayup. Can't miss it. Just a half mile down the road, and you'll see the fence and the headstones beyond. Her place is down the path off to the right." He eyed Ward carefully for a moment and sipped his drink. When Ward nodded and started walking, he said, "Bit chilly. Don't have a coat? You're that stranger involved in the murders, that right? Thought you weren't supposed to leave town."

"I'm not. Just going to see Maggie, then I'll be back." Ward turned, picking up the pace, for some reason more annoyed that the man would question his preparedness for the weather than his mention of him not leaving town. He supposed his regard for the city watch was at a baseline level of something like contempt.

"See that you do," the guard called after him.

Grace chimed in, echoing Ward's thoughts, "What's with people in authority positions acting like jerks?"

He looked at her and sighed. "I don't know. We're probably being a little hard on them. I am a stranger, after all. They've had to deal with more deaths than they're used to, I guess." Ward saw the stone and wrought-iron fence and, beyond it, the headstones the guard had promised, so he turned off the road, walking along a dirt and gravel path. He could see a thatch-roofed dwelling about a hundred yards ahead, just past the corner of the cemetery lot. With no other structures in sight, he figured it had to be Maggie's house. In the gray light of a slightly overcast dawn, he paused to look over the low stone wall at the cemetery beyond.

It looked like it went on for several acres, and many of the hundreds of headstones he could see were blackened and cracked. "Must have been here before the fire passed through."

Grace sat atop a nearby stone fencepost, and if Ward hadn't just been looking that way and seen no sign of her, he could almost imagine she'd been there all along. "I was wondering about that. Have you noticed that the buildings in Tarnish are mostly stone at the ground level and lime-washed? I wonder if the people living in this little city have been here since before the fire passed through or if they just moved in and rebuilt."

"It's a strange world. The people in Tarnish sure seem like they own the place. I bet they have shelters or something. Don't you think people in population centers like this would have caves or basements or something they run to when the fire comes near?"

Grace pursed her lips, contemplating. "I suppose. Knowing people, though, they'd forget after fifty years or so, and by the time fire comes 'round again, they'd panic and do something stupid."

"Uh-huh." Ward started walking again, angling for the smaller stone wall around the thatched cabin. He could see the rusted iron gate hanging crookedly near the center and strolled toward it, eyes searching for the silver bell he was supposed to ring. When he was just a few steps away, he saw, dangling between two iron rods, a tiny bell hanging from a strand of spun wire. He stepped up to it and gave it a flick with his forefinger, and a melodic, high-pitched *ding-ding* rewarded his efforts. Ward watched the front door of the little cabin, noting the woodsmoke in the air drifting up from a round, brick chimney.

After a few seconds, Grace broke the tension, "Kind of a creepy place for a house."

"Hush, you don't know if this lady will be able to see or hear you, right?" His words had the desired effect—Grace vanished from sight. Ward was just getting ready to flick the bell again when the door opened with a creak, and a small round face peered out. Ward thought it must be a child looking at him, but the long, tangled gray hair made that improbable. Even so, the woman must have only stood four feet tall as she called out, in a reedy voice, "Come in."

"Hello!" Ward pushed the gate open and, careful to close it behind himself, walked up the steppingstone path to the door.

"Hello, stranger. Hurry, I'm letting all the warmth out!"

Ward hustled up to the door and, ducking low, stepped through as she pulled it wide. The inside of the hut had a ceiling that might have accommodated Ward comfortably, but there were long, crisscrossing lines of drying herbs hanging where his head wanted to be, and he had to keep

hunched low as he followed the little woman inside. She wore a woolen knitted shawl patterned with circles and squares of various colors but predominantly yellow. When she sat at the little wooden kitchen table and motioned for Ward to sit across from her, he saw she'd been working on a project, grinding a root into a brilliant indigo powder.

"I smell blood on you, stranger. Did you have trouble on your way to see me?"

Ward grunted, shifting the chair away from the table to fit more comfortably in the small space. "None this morning, no. I'm sorry I didn't have cleaner clothes to wear; I've had to order new ones from a tailor."

When she smiled and looked up, Ward saw what everyone must be noticing about him; her eyes shone with a pale white light, making the blue and green irises stand out like little sparkling jewels above her flushed, rosy cheeks. She had nice teeth for a woman who seemed to be coming up on a hundred years old, and when she spoke, her words were clear and sharp, even though the voice that delivered them was breathy and soft, "Well? What brings you to Maggie?"

"Um, my name's Ward and I'm not from around here, as you may have guessed."

"How would I have done that?"

Ward frowned and scratched his head. "I guess I'm not sure. Everyone in town seems to realize it right away."

"Mmhmm, well, Maggie doesn't know everyone like she used to. What is it? Some sort of pestilence of the genitals?"

Ward almost choked at the old woman's words, and coughing, choking back a laugh, he shook his head. "No, nothing like that. When I said I wasn't from around here, I meant from this world. I recently found myself transported here from a place with very little mana, and I'm trying to learn more about it."

"Oh? You wish to be my 'prentice? Bit large for my taste. Large and male. You'd have to build your own sleeping quarters; I won't have you taking up all the space in here."

"No, no, that's not...that's not what I was trying to do. Here, let me show you." Ward reached under his shirt to where he'd tucked the copper plate, held in place against his chest by the strap of his shoulder holster. "I received this in the catacombs, and I was hoping you could help me figure it out."

That got the diminutive woman's attention. She set down the little jar she'd been uncapping and held out her hand. "Let me see that!"

Something in Ward made him cautious, and he held it back, lowering it to his lap. "Let's make an agreement first."

"Oho! Clever one, aren't you? I thought you were new to our ways!" She winked one of those softly glowing blue eyes at him.

"Well, I've learned enough to know the *words*—Ward stressed the word—are valuable. If I show you this, won't you be receiving something valuable?"

“Depends. Are you going to let me copy it down? I doubt I’ll hold it,” she tapped the side of her head, “long enough to write it after you’ve gone.”

For once, Ward wished Grace wasn’t hiding; he’d have liked her more cutthroat business sense. He shrugged. “What do you suggest?”

“I suggest you let me see that page, and if it’s what I think it is, I’ll try to help you understand it. In exchange, you let me copy it.”

Ward thought about her offer. She was old, and he wondered how someone could go through a long life in a world like this one without amassing a bunch of words of power. Were they really that tightly guarded? If so, he would be giving her a lot with very questionable gains promised in exchange. Nevertheless, she was friendly and seemed to know a thing or two. More importantly, Ward didn’t have a lot of other options. Shaking his head and clicking his tongue like she was driving a hard bargain, he lifted the thin copper sheet and laid it on the table before himself. “All right, Maggie. Teach me some magic.”