

7 – A Stranger in Need

When Ward woke the following day, his mouth was so dry it felt coated in cotton, and the twisting knot of hunger in his belly demanded attention. He groaned and rolled to his back, opening his eyes to the pale gray-blue sky. He blinked rapidly a few times, growing accustomed to the light, and then he noticed a tall shadow to his left. At first, he ignored it; in his mind, it was one of the nearby saplings, more prominent than he remembered from the night before but nothing to be alarmed about. Then the tree cleared its throat, and Ward jerked his eyes toward the shape, realizing that it was not, in fact, a tree.

A tall man with swarthy skin and piercing blue eyes that seemed to glow with pale yellow light stood watching him. He leaned upon a tall spear with a long, curved blade and was wrapped head to toe in soft, flowing green robes. “Good morning, stranger.” His voice was pleasant, warm, even, and Ward found himself responding with a smile.

“Um, good morning.” Ward hurriedly glanced around, looking for Grace, but saw no sign of his personal devil. Had he imagined the whole thing? He grunted, shifting to sit up on the blanket.

“I noticed your camp. It occurred to me that I might better use my time advancing in my journey, but then I thought, ‘No, Huseem, no. A fellow traveler there rests, and a good traveler sees to the needs of those with whom he shares the road.’ So, traveler, might I offer you any aid?”

Ward cleared his throat, uncomfortable sitting while the stranger loomed over him. “What now? Aid?”

“You seem well fed. Hale, in fact. I see the shine of mana in your eyes, so I know you aren’t without means. A weapon rests there under your arm, and I see a well-stocked pack. Am I correct in assuming that you need no aid?” He leaned against his spear as he spoke, bringing his face closer to Ward. His weathered, tan lips smiled as his white, straight teeth formed the words, enunciating each syllable with perfect precision. Ward could sit and listen to this man speak all day. He couldn’t stop thinking about how the fellow would make a killing as a morning show host or a primetime anchorman. “Sir?”

“Oh! Right, right. No, I’m not sure I need anything. Kind of you to stop by, though. I, uh, don’t think I realized how deeply I was sleeping.” Ward didn’t even remember falling asleep; hadn’t he been in the middle of a conversation with Grace? Where the hell was she? “So, where are you headed? Did you say your name was Huseem? Am I saying that right? I’m Ward, by the way.”

“Well met, Ward! Yes, that is my name. I’m traveling south and east.” He pointed for effect. “The city of Tarnish lies that way, and I will venture into the catacombs.”

“Right, right.” Ward, eager to be out of the stranger’s shadow, however friendly he seemed, grunted and shifted, clambering to his feet, hardly believing that he still had his shoes on. He hadn’t slept in his shoes—boots back then—since he’d been deployed. He wore a pair of sturdy leather oxfords that he’d bought off the net around the same time he’d gotten his hats. At the thought, Ward slapped his head and frowned. He must have left it behind in the underground chamber when that crazy woman stabbed him.

“Something amiss, friend?”

“Just realized I lost my hat.”

“Ah, a shame. The sun can be unbearable. At least you have a good, full head of hair.”

“Yeah, guess there’s that.” Ward reached up and rubbed at his short hair, letting it feather his fingers. He liked the feeling; it was a lot thicker than it had been yesterday morning. “Well, anything I can do for you, Huseem?”

“Oh, how fortunate I am that I stopped by! I am, indeed, in need of some assistance.”

“Oh?” Ward had begun to dig through the scav’s pack, hoping to find something to drink. He looked up, squinting a bit in surprise at the stranger’s words. He grasped hold of a cool metal bottle with a screw top and pulled it from the pack.

“Ah, yes. You see, I have an ass, a beast of burden. You understand?”

“Sure.” Ward sniffed the bottle’s contents. He didn’t detect any odor, so he took a tentative sip.

“Well, as we made our way toward the fine city of Tarnish, my ass stepped into the ash, and his hoof didn’t find purchase! He fell through the rotten, burned timbers of what must have once been a cellar.”

Ward swallowed the cool liquid and sighed with pleasure; it had a slight citrus aftertaste but was definitely water. “Sorry to hear that, Huseem. Did your donkey get injured?”

“Yes, my friend, yes. He’s lying there on the ash-covered stone floor with two shattered forelegs, slowly dying, suffering terribly. I watched him for a while, hoping the poor beast would succumb to his wounds, but he never did. Watching him, I grew hopeful as he grew still, but every time I started to have hope that his pain had ended, he began to thrash and cry out. The poor, stupid beast.”

“Jesus. That’s rough. Uh, what do you want me to do?” Ward took another long drink, then he screwed the top onto the bottle.

“I need your help, friend Ward, to put the poor animal down.” He shrugged, almost as if to say sorry.

“How’s that, now? You’ve got a nice long spear there.”

“No, you see, I’ve sworn an oath never to touch another with the intent to harm unless they harm me first. My poor ass has never done me harm.”

Ward frowned. “Aren’t you harming it by letting it suffer?”

“Perhaps, but if I broke my leg, I don’t think I’d look upon a man kindly who stabbed me with a spear.”

“You’re not a donkey.”

“Exactly! And there lies the quandary within which I find myself. I know that killing the ass is the merciful thing, but I know that it would harm the ass. I know leaving my poor beast is also harmful, so I must find another solution. You are that solution, my friend.”

“Ah, hell, man.” Ward stuffed the bottle into the pack and bent to pick up his blanket. “Let me fold this up, and then I’ll follow you to your . . . ass.” Huseem leaped to help, grabbing the blanket's edge and working with him to fold it into a neat square. Ward stuffed it into the top of the pack, hoisted it, and snatched up his cloth sack full of pistols and bullets. “Ready?”

“I truly appreciate you doing me this kindness, Ward. Not many so near the burn would help a stranger with such a request.” He pressed a fist into a flat palm and bowed slightly.

“Ah, nothing to worry about. I didn’t have big plans for the day.”

Huseem began hiking southwest, and Ward followed, trudging behind him over the new, springy grass. After a while, they re-entered the burn, leaving the vibrant new life behind and walking up and down low hills until Ward heard the most godawful sound he’d ever come across, and he’d heard some bad shit on deployment. He immediately knew what it was; only a donkey could reach that hoarse, throaty note in its cry. Still, it wasn’t like any donkey bray he’d ever heard. It was long, protracted, raspy, and full of misery. Ward hurried his step, loosening his gun in the holster.

As he caught up to Huseem and began to hurry past him, the stranger matched his speed. “You hear the suffering in his cry?”

Ward didn’t answer. His face had grown stony as he pulled his pistol out. The donkey cried out again, and he altered his course to move more directly toward it. Huseem continued to speak about how much he hated to hear the donkey suffer and how he hated to lose a loyal old friend. Ward ignored him. He came to the edge of an ash-covered stone foundation, and beyond it, he could see what Huseem had described—burned timbers, shattered by the weight of the poor, filthy donkey thrashing and braying at the bottom of the ash-dusted stone floor.

Ward lifted his gun and took aim. He didn’t hesitate, didn’t slow down to wonder if he was aiming at the right spot—he’d never shot a donkey before. He lined up his sights, aiming just beneath the donkey’s long, bent ear, and smoothly squeezed the trigger. His gun barked, and the horrible braying cry stopped short, silenced forever.

Ward turned to frown at Huseem, but he didn’t say anything. He popped the cylinder on the pistol, pried the spent cartridge out with a nail, and slipped it into his coat pocket. He fished around in his other pocket for a fresh round, guessing by the heft of the handful that he had ten or twelve more after that, and slid it into the empty chamber.

“A mighty implement of battle you wield there, friend Ward. What an uncanny, deft, and mortal blow you’ve struck! My old friend suffers no more!” Suddenly, Huseem’s good humor when they’d first met felt less pleasant to Ward, and he decided he didn’t really like a guy who’d leave his “old friend” lying alone in agony like that. Ward watched him narrowly for a minute more, observing his facial expressions while he rambled on about his gratitude. He *said* he was sad to lose the donkey, but he certainly didn’t seem upset.

“Right, well, don’t mention it.” Ward waved and turned his back on the man, once again aiming to walk east.

“Wait! Wait, good traveler! Is there no way I can repay your kindness?”

Ward turned back to him and shook his head. “Nah, I’m fine. Would’ve done the same without you asking.”

“Then I owe you, Ward. Should we meet again, I’ll not forget.” The strange, green-clad man lifted a long, slender arm and waved.

Ward turned, waved, and offered a thumbs-up. He kept walking and, despite feeling like something was hinky about the weird stranger, only looked over his shoulder once to ensure he wasn’t being followed. He had no idea where he was going, but he knew he wanted to get out of the ash, and unless he was nuts and had imagined the whole thing, he remembered Grace saying something about traveling in that direction.

He felt good—hungry but good. Something about the air, the sunlight, or just being younger and healthier was doing wonders for his mood. Despite the dirty business he’d just helped Huseem with, he felt positively upbeat. “Not like I left much behind.”

He shook his head, chuckling. The department wouldn’t miss him. He’d pissed off too many people over the last few years, burned too many bridges. His sister would, and that stung a little, but Grace never said he couldn’t return. Maybe he’d strike it rich out here in the “wider universe” and find a way to help her. “Not like her husband’s ever gonna—”

“Ward!” Suddenly, Grace was there, standing three steps ahead of him. She immediately charged forward to punch him in the chest.

“Ouch! What the hell?”

“Weren’t you worried about me?” She scowled, pouted, and snarled, somehow all at once, and Ward rubbed at his chest, trying not to laugh at her outrage.

“Worried?”

“Didn’t you think it odd that I wasn’t around when you awoke?”

“Sure, but I thought talking to you all day yesterday was odd, too. I’m still not sure I haven’t snapped. I could be sitting in a psych ward right now, chewing on God-knows-what kind of medication.”

“Not this again!” She balled up her fists and held them down by her sides, arms straight as two-by-fours, and Ward thought maybe her head would explode.

“Relax. I’m not saying I believe that; I’m just saying it wasn’t so strange waking up and not seeing you. I did that most of my life, you know.”

“Well, you *should* have been worried! I was hiding!”

“Hiding?”

“From that man, that monk or disciple or whatever he might be.” She visibly shivered.

“Uh, I thought only I could see you.” Ward removed his pack and opened it, determined to find something to eat.

“Normally, but you saw his eyes! Have you ever seen anyone’s eyes glow like that?”

“I think you know the answer to that one.”

“He had so much mana in him! I’ve heard of yellow rankers or topaz-class adepts, but I’ve never seen one, not on Earth. The most powerful mages I ever saw on Earth had eyes that only glowed white.”

“White? Isn’t white brighter than yellow, usually? I mean, when I want to buy a bright bulb, I—”

“No, dummy!” Grace shook her head, inhaled, and exhaled slowly, closing her eyes. “Sorry, Ward. I’m just wound up after that brush with death.”

“Brush with death?”

“That man was clearly testing you. Had you said the wrong thing or done the wrong thing, he might have killed you with a simple phrase.”

“A phrase?” Ward raised an eyebrow, smirking at her hysterics. He lifted out his folded blanket and began shifting the other things he’d found in the pack, trying to get to some foil-wrapped packages he’d seen in there the day before.

“Anyway, as mana builds up in a person’s system, it grows denser and begins to take on color. You have a shine, not a proper glow yet. Still, when you get your first glow, it will be pale, soft white, and people might call you a moonstone or white ranker. As it grows brighter, it’ll eventually transition to take on colors. Deeper, darker colors mean more power.”

“Lemme ask you something.” Ward grinned. “If you can see what I see, how are you seeing my eyes?”

“Your eyes? Maybe the same reason I can touch you and nothing else. I don’t know! Stay focused, Ward!” Grace cried, slapping herself on the forehead. “I’m glad, and you should be too, that you passed whatever strange test that man put you through. I thought I’d be running for my life without any sort of host.”

“Oh, I see; you were going to let me just get massacred so you could wander around this nice new planet and find a better host.” Ward winked at her, then said, “Aha!” as he gently pulled a foil-wrapped package out of the pack. He could already smell the sugary contents—it had to be some kind of cake or something. He gently began peeling the foil away.

“What was I supposed to do? If I showed myself, I was afraid he’d be able to see me, which might spur him to kill you. There’s a lot of prejudice in the universe when it comes to my kind!”

“Prejudice, huh? I wouldn’t be so sure that guy could kill me, anyway. Last time I checked, a .357 beats a spear.” Ward had revealed a dark, moist cake of some sort, and when he lifted it to his nose, it smelled delicious. He broke off a piece and popped it into his mouth. His tastebuds exploded with flavor—something like almonds and brown sugar and butter. He chewed and swallowed, groaning a little with pleasure. “Damn, that poor dead scav had some good stuff in his pack.”

“Poor? He was going to kill you, Ward. As for your little pistol, there, yes, it’s dangerous, but not so much to someone who’s reached bright yellow levels of mana.”

“Mind explaining that? I get it; his eyes were glowing a lot, but what else can he do with mana? I don’t feel much different after last night—”

“Ward, what you absorbed compared to that man’s mana is, literally, like a drop of water next to an Olympic swimming pool.” She sat down on a patch of grass and looked up at him while he ate the sweet bread. “There are words he could say with that amount of mana to draw on, words that would peel the flesh from your bones or ignite you like a candle. You don’t have the mana to defend yourself. Even if you surprised and shot him, his body is so enriched that the bullet might only give him a shallow wound or bruise. I’ve heard of firearms enchanted with glyphs that could surely harm someone like him, but yours is nothing special.”

“Really? But if he used those ‘words,’ wouldn’t it dry up his mana? You know, put him back to square one?”

Grace sighed and shook her head. “I’ve done a bad job explaining this, I guess—my fault. No, Ward, think of mana like a battery, a battery you can build up in your body. It never truly leaves you. It just depletes and takes some time to regenerate. It’s like . . .” she tapped a nail softly on her chin while she thought and then snapped her fingers. “It’s like when you build up your muscles lifting weights! You get stronger and stronger, right? Still, you can wear the muscles out, and they need to recover. That’s what mana is like. It never really leaves you, well, not until you die, anyway.”

“I guess it makes sense. That, uh, hemograph said I had a mana well now—”

“Exactly! That’s it! That’s your mana battery.” Grace nodded eagerly.

Ward swallowed another bite and then asked, “You couldn’t show yourself or speak, but you could hear, right? That guy said some city was that way.” He pointed to what he figured was southeast.

“Yes!” Grace moved close, eyes wide with excitement. “And catacombs! I think they’re one of the Vainglory challenges!”