

40 – Cracking Skulls

Chiselhammer Lane was a good deal busier than most of the other streets Ward had walked through that night. It had to be getting close to midnight, but he saw groups of young men in heavy coats standing here and there, many of them smoking something from pipes that glowed in the dim light thrown out by the amber-glassed streetlights. Fay had been right in her recollection that a tavern was on the street. It was across the road and a good fifty yards from him, but he could hear the carousing going on in there—it sounded like a men’s choir at practice with lots of laughter thrown in for good measure.

His dark coat and hat weren’t out of place among the men who leaned against buildings, watching this stoop or that. It took him a minute to realize he didn’t see any ladies, or at least not any obvious ones. It might not have registered if he hadn’t finally set his eyes on a pair of women in bright skirts and flimsy tops, little more than camisoles, standing near an alley just past the bar. He was comfortable in his woolen jacket, but he couldn’t imagine they weren’t freezing dressed the way they were.

“Prostitutes,” Grace said, following his gaze.

“I guess.” Ward didn’t have the bandwidth to think about them; he’d just spotted Foyle’s shop across the street. The front of the building bore some of the largest windows on the block, and they’d been painted in gold leaf, fanciful lettering to read “Foyle’s Insurance Offices” and in smaller lettering, “Edgar J. Foyle, Proprietor.” Three men sat on the shop’s front stoop, but only a dim interior light illuminated the window. It didn’t look like Foyle was open for business.

Ward kept his head down and walked past a group of young men throwing dice on the sidewalk. He’d made it a few steps past when one of them loudly said, “Look at this dandy.” It was obvious he’d meant for Ward to hear. He tried to keep walking, ignoring the kid’s taunt, but he could hear the scuffle of boots on stone and knew the men were standing up.

“Hey! We know you?” a different, deeper voice called. Ward sighed, more annoyed than anything else that he’d been noticed. He turned to face the four men, tilting his head up so his eyes shone out from under the dark brim of his hat.

“You want to know me?”

When they saw the pale glow of his eyes in the shadows under his hat—when they heard the thinly veiled threat in his tone—the men suddenly had a bunch of other things to be looking at. The young, reedy-voiced one turned and sat down, muttering something like, “My mistake,” and the others were quick to follow suit. Apparently, a sorcerer walking around near midnight with a cudgel on his shoulder wasn’t something they wanted to investigate. Ward didn’t hesitate to turn and start walking again; so far, the men outside Foyle’s shop hadn’t reacted, and he wanted to keep it that way.

There were two buildings past Foyle’s before another street intersected with Chiselhammer Lane, so he angled for the corner on the far side, calmly crossing the street. When he’d reached the opposite curb, stepping over the open street gutter, he glanced to his left to see if the three men on Foyle’s stoop had reacted. They hadn’t; they all sat leaning against one railing or the other, and if Ward were guessing, he’d say they were more asleep than awake. He saw Grace following his glance as he rounded the corner. “Probably hired as night security, but I doubt they ever have to do anything.”

“Are we talking again?”

“Did you ever stop?”

“What? You’re mad I mentioned the prostitutes?”

“Nah, but I’d have been annoyed if I really had to concentrate.” Ward slowed his steps because he’d gotten to the rear of the building on the corner and could see an opening for an alley. He glanced at Grace, saw her scowl, and sighed. “Don’t get all sensitive on me. I know you’re a lot more observant than I am, and I appreciate your help, okay?”

A slow smile crept over her lips. “You think I’m more observant than you are?”

“Well, you remember more of what you see. How about that?” He watched her process the sparse compliment and then stepped up to the corner of the brick building, peering into the dark alley. Just as he’d suspected, it was cluttered with old crates and refuse, but he saw some light halfway down, right about where Foyle’s building would be. “Wish I could make myself invisible. What kind of magic world doesn’t have invisibility?”

“I’m sure there are spells for that. I doubt your body could handle them, though.”

“Uh-huh.” They’d been whispering, but Ward held a finger to his lips and stepped into the alley, crouching low and creeping toward a stack of small wooden crates behind the first building. When he reached it, he could see the dark recess where a closed metal door would allow access to the building. He began to think his plan might work—if this building had a back door, Foyle’s probably did, too. He edged around the stack of crates to look down the alley, and sure enough, he could just make out a bulky shadow of a man as he shifted under the flickering amber gas lamp on the back of the third building.

Lurking there, in the cold night air, some kind of moldy melon rind by his right boot, Ward considered how impulsive he was being. He’d told Haley he’d check Foyle out, but he hadn’t said anything about storming the guy’s offices. What if he got overwhelmed and had to run? What if he killed one of the guys guarding the door? It could happen—he’d certainly not intended to kill the one who’d jumped him at Haley’s house. Thinking of that reminded him why he’d come, however. He was tired of being on the defensive. He was tired of looking over his shoulder. When it came down to it, he wasn’t okay with the idea that a guy was sitting snugly in his office while men he’d paid were stalking Ward and Haley, killing people in the process.

Ward scanned the alley between him and the back of Foyle’s place, looking for another place to hide, and came up empty. The building between had nothing behind it, just a closed metal door on a brick wall. “Well,” he whispered, “I guess it’s just about go time.”

“Are you sure about this?”

“Not really, but yeah, I’m ready to see this business settled.” Ward reached down and picked up one of the larger empty crates, holding the club to the side, away from the view of anyone on his left. Then he started walking, whistling a meaningless tune as he strolled down the alley. He’d only made it a dozen feet when a gruff voice called, “Wrong way, chum.”

“What’s ‘at?” Ward asked, trying to put a bit of a slur into his voice.

“Turn around. This ain’t the alley for you.”

“Jus’ gettin’ a box for m’ kittens.” Ward couldn’t help the stupid grin on his face as he played the drunk cat lover. He purposefully stumbled toward the light, crying, “Oh, whoops! Grab it, would’ya?”

“Stupid shit!” the gruff voice growled, and Ward felt some resistance as the bulky man stepped out of the shadows and grabbed ahold of the crate. He shoved it viciously, and Ward probably would have fallen backward if he hadn’t already let go and stepped to the side, his hickory cudgel lifted high. With a *whoosh* and a resounding *thunk*, Ward clubbed the big guy on the forehead, knocking him back, gasping, as a split in his scalp began to sheet blood down into his eyes.

“What the—” The second guy never finished his sentence. Ward was on him, cracking the brutal wooden cudgel against his head, just above the ear, and following it up with a series of savage cracks to his neck, shoulder, and arms as he fell. Ward whirled on the first guy and saw him fumbling at his belt to detach an axe hooked to a metal stud via a leather loop. His fingers weren’t doing what he wanted them to do, though, and he kept swiping at his eyes with his other hand, trying to clear the blood away. Ward could tell he was dazed, probably only half-conscious, and he stepped over him and delivered another resounding crack to the side of his head, putting an end to his efforts.

“Jesus, Ward.” Grace was standing on the stoop, under the light, staring at the two unmoving figures. “Are they *dead*?”

“I don’t know, but if not, I’d say the fight’s out of ‘em.” Ward looked past Grace to the metal door, saw the big brass keyhole above the latch, and reached for it, pulling. Just as he’d suspected, it was locked. “You think Foyle gives his guards a key?” He squatted and began to pat at the pockets of the burly guard.

“Maybe. I wouldn’t, but I’m not a ‘bet-taker.’ He might have a reason to give them access to the business.”

“We’ll see.” Ward grunted as he jerked the big man to the side to get at his coat pocket. He had a prodigious belly, and unconscious or dead as he was, he was difficult to shift. He smelled like onions and sweat, and when Ward stuck his hand in his pocket, he immediately regretted it, pulling out a crusty, wadded handkerchief. He spent more time than he would have liked searching the two men and came up with only a handful of glories, two pipes, some kind of pipeweed, and a flask of something that smelled like paint thinner. “Shit.”

“If you had some picks, I could help you with this lock. It’s not very sophisticated.”

“Yeah, but I don’t.” Ward studied the door, thought about it for a minute, then stood up, hefted his cudgel, and knocked on the door. He didn’t bang loudly—just a couple of quick raps with his knuckles.

“Are you...*nuts*?” Grace was backing away from him as though she could distance herself from whatever trouble he was about to get into.

“No cameras. No peephole.” Ward shrugged. He’d dealt with many criminals in his day, and one thing he’d come to appreciate from those who sold themselves as hired goons was that they usually weren’t the sharpest tools in the shed. “I doubt Foyle answers the back door for himself.” He was just lifting his fist to knock again when a bolt slid to the side with a rasping click, and the door opened an inch.

“What?” a nasally, congested voice asked. Ward reached forward, grabbed the edge of the metal door, and viciously yanked it open. The man must have been holding onto the latch because he cried out with a surprised, “Oof!” Then, in a rush of warm, smoky air, he stumbled onto the stoop, and Ward swung his cudgel at him. The guy—slight, short, and wearing a thick leather vest—lifted his arm and got it between Ward’s blow and the side of his head. Then, in a shocking display of adroitness, he wrapped his arm around the cudgel, tucking it up under his armpit, and stepped forward, pounding a fist that felt like a hunk of cement into Ward’s left side.

“Ugh!” Ward grunted and stumbled back, but he kept his grip on the club. Maybe that wasn’t smart because the guy moved with him, keeping close and driving punch after punch into Ward’s side. Ward was holding the club with his right hand, and he managed to get his left arm down, blocking some of the damage meant for his torso. Still, he felt the punches like hammer blows, and when he tried to grab the guy’s punching arm, he could feel the heat—he was a Gopah practitioner.

For the first time, Ward began to feel like he’d bitten off more than he could chew. He was a tough guy; he’d been in plenty of fights, but he’d been armed in the more deadly ones. Fist fighting, grappling—he wasn’t an expert. He’d counted on his superior strength, along with the element of surprise and sheer brutality, to see him through the raid on Foyle’s offices, and it seemed he might have messed up because the guy tenderizing his side didn’t look to be slowing down. One thing Ward had going for him was that the clean-shaven, angry-eyed brawler didn’t seem to have nearly as much heat in his fists as Haley could muster.

“Throw him off or something!” Grace yelled from the street; she’d moved off the stoop when Ward and the door guard began their scuffle. Ward tried to ignore her, but then he thought about it. He had to have fifty pounds on the guy, and he was strong from mana, wasn’t he? Why was he on the defensive? Ward growled, stopped blocking, yanked on the wooden cudgel, pulled the fighter closer, and then started wailing away with his free hand, trying to pound the guy in any sensitive spot he could find.

At first, the door guard seemed excited by Ward’s switch to offensive tactics. He tucked his chin and continued to pound away at Ward’s ribs, but his exuberance began to fade as Ward’s ribs refused to break, and his heavy fist began to deliver some punishment of its own. Ward smashed him in the ear, the shoulder, the cheek, the ear, pounding away again and again. They traded blows like heavyweights, only the guard wasn’t in Ward’s weight class. He wasn’t in his league when it came to durability. The hired muscle began to stagger, his punches came slower, and Ward’s knuckles opened contusions on his bald head, ear, cheek, and brow.

After half a minute of furious grunting and smacking of flesh, the guard let go of Ward’s club, staggered back, and opened his mouth, taking a deep breath. Ward knew he was about to shout an alarm, so rather than wind the cudgel up for a mighty swing, he lunged forward, driving the round, hard end into the man’s windpipe. The door guard’s cry was cut short in a choking gurgle, and he turned, eyes bulging in his bloody, bruised face, and stumbled toward the door. Ward had anticipated the move, though, and the club *clunked* against the top of his head with a disturbing finality. The Gopah fighter, probably someone Haley knew, fell to the floor, utterly still.

Ward groaned and stretched, rubbing his hand along his side, feeling his tender ribs. He was glad he'd been wearing his thick woolen coat; those punches would've hurt even more without it tangling in the guy's fist, but he would be terribly sore for a few days. He peered through the open door and saw a dark kitchen with a single candle burning on a small, round table. A thin book lay open before it, and Ward could see the pencil-drawn doodles of the man he'd likely just killed. He stepped inside and pulled the door closed.

"That was ugly," Grace said, sitting atop the table beside the little notebook and candle.

Ward nodded and replied in a whisper, "Ugly and painful. At least it doesn't look like the guys out front heard." Clutching his blood-stained cudgel, he walked through the little kitchen. He could feel the wooden floorboards trying to creak, but he stepped slowly and carefully and made it to the door without any noise. When he opened it, he saw a short hallway that ran beside a staircase leading up. He could see a door at the end of the hall and figured it would open up into the sitting area at the front of the shop. Two closed doors were on his left; according to Fay's description, one was Foyle's office.

Ward slowly crept up to the first door and pressed his ear against it. He held his breath, listening for twenty long seconds, but didn't hear anything. He tried the knob, and it turned, so he opened the door just a crack and peered through with one eye. The shadows were thick, but a sliver of light through a high window revealed stacked boxes atop narrow tables, all neatly labeled. "File room," Grace breathed, probably trying not to startle him. Ward nodded and pulled the door closed. He moved quietly to the next door and, again, pressed his ear to the wood.

Ward didn't hear anything from the other side, but when he tried to turn the knob, he found it locked. Again, Grace said what he was thinking, "Probably his office. I can imagine he wants it locked when he's not in there. I bet he's upstairs in his living quarters."

"Yep," Ward whispered, then carefully, slowly, patiently crept to the stairs and began to go up. He'd figured Foyle would be sleeping. Wouldn't it make sense for a businessman to be sleeping after midnight? He'd been worried that the sounds of the scuffle out back would have awoken him, but it didn't seem that was the case. Surely, the guards from the front would've come running if Foyle found something amiss and raised the alarm.

Ward made it all the way up the stairs with only one of them creaking under his weight. He froze for nearly a full minute when that happened but heard nothing but the occasional ticking sounds that seemed to be ever-present in old buildings like that. "Where's the warmth from? I thought there'd be a fire." Grace spoke softly, and Ward knew only he could hear her, but it still bothered him.

He hissed, "I saw a heat register in the kitchen. He must have a boiler in the basement."

"Oh, makes sense. Steam-age." She nodded and tiptoed up the last few stairs ahead of him. Ward followed her and stepped onto the upstairs landing. A short hallway led to a closed door just before him, and an opening to another hallway was ahead and to the left. Ward crept through the hallways, listening at doors, peeking through, and only when he'd reached the furthest one, down the long, dark hallway, did he discern the soft sighs of a woman breathing and the grumbling, wheeze of a man's nasally snores. "Oh, great," Grace said, reminding Ward that she could hear everything he could, "Looks like you're going to have to murder an innocent woman."