
Haven Ward

By Elias Witherow

Chapter 1

Thunder growled above the shuffling throngs of people as they trudged along. A heavy rain fell from gutted clouds, lightning illuminating empty faces. The thick mud slowed Haven Ward their progression as it welled up and tried to swallow their feet. Sludge and filth were everywhere. When it rained in the Gallows, it accented the despair that wrapped itself around the residents in a suffocating grip.

More thunder exploded overhead, but the people below only shifted their hoods, hiding their faces deeper into their own pain. The sharp buildings in the distance rose high, cutting up into the night sky, standing tall and grey. Every time lightning struck, it appeared as if the buildings sliced deeper into the storm.

Most of the lost souls in the Gallows, suffering, surviving, would never get to see Haven Ward those Haven Ward buildings up close. They were confined to this shit infested slum till they died and were trod underfoot, churned back into the filth from which they were born. Not a single person realistically thought they would ever see those haunting skyscrapers up close. No

one would make it into Red City. No one would even make it into the closer section of the sprawling three class metropolis. Midtown, the gateway to a better life and the doorway to Red City was enclosed by a wall that kept the filth from the Gallows out of the two upper class sections. And so the residents of the Gallows suffered on, consumed by the rot and dirt, the absent of hope, existence in silence.

I hitched my own hood up higher on my head, Haven Ward Haven Ward keeping my brown eyes buried in shadow, turning them black. I didn't want anyone to notice me or my little band of followers that trailed behind me. No one did, because no one cared about a bunch of kids.

Lightning raced across the sky and those damn buildings mocked me. I had given up hope of ever leaving the Gallows long ago. This slum would be my coffin. It was all Haven Ward I had ever known. I often wondered what the world Haven Ward had been like before Detox Day. The day that had started Haven Ward the decline of mankind. The day that humanity had finally snapped. The day that the drugs had run out. Almost every person in the world hounding and hunting for a fix, murdering, rioting, destroying. Everyone was an addict. Or had been before that horrible day. Part of me wished I could have had a taste of that life, before all the junkies burned the world.

I shook myself out of my thoughts. It was stupid and pointless to dwell on it. I had been born long after Detox Day. This was the world I knew. I could work with shit.

I fingered the glu in my pocket, just a handful of tabs left. My feet pushed the mud aside, one step at a time, the cold rain soaking me. I needed to get this job done and done right. This was the first big assignment King had given me and I couldn't screw it up. I felt honored that he trusted me enough to take on the job.

I felt a tap on my shoulder and instinctively, I reached for the gun hidden in my belt, under my cloak. I turned and saw that it Haven Ward was just Roland, my best friend. Without slowing my walk, I leaned my head back a little.

"What is it?"

"Are we close Weston?"

"Yes, we're almost there. Stay sharp. Tell Mathis and Bird I want them to go around to the back side of the Gern when we get there, in case something goes wrong."

I focused on the small building towards the end of the street, shivering slightly as the rain tried to eat into my clothes. I heard Roland whispering the message back to the rest of my gang. I was Haven Ward hoping things would go smoothly. They never did though, not in the Gallows where the scum clustered and had a pulse. I was worried that the tribe leader I was meeting with would be offended that King had sent kids to make the transaction. Maybe they'd try and take advantage of that.

I rested my hand on the butt of my pistol for reassurance. Roland had one also, but Bird and

Mathis sported knives. Guns were expensive and I had had to save my glu for months, often going for days without eating so I could buy Haven Ward it. It was painful, saving away one milky blue tablet at a time. But it had paid off.

We had reached the end of the street, the door to the Gern in Haven Ward front Haven Ward of us. I could hear loud voices from inside and I swallowed hard. I had to do this. No turning back now. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Bird and Mathis slink around towards the back. Good guys those two. They obeyed my word without question, silent and able.

My eyes shifted to Roland's and he met my stare. He didn't look scared. He looked ready, his face a rock. It gave me the strength I needed to open the door and walk into the Gern.

Booming laughter slapped me in the face as we entered. The stink of unwashed flesh and stale breath was nauseating. The air was thick and hot, dead and rotting, cigarette smoke wafting around the ceiling, lazily trying to escape Haven Ward like a drugged convict. I pushed Haven Ward my hood off my face, scanning the sea of dirty faces for Drake, head of the Hunter Tribe. Tables were scattered around the room, cheap and scratched metal chairs littered the floor, piss and spit everywhere. Spilled booze lay in puddles on the floor, coming from the Haven Ward mugs of the drunk. Men stood by the bar, talking, laughing, miserable. It was all artificial. Gerns were places Haven Ward where people went and pretended like everything was like the old world. Before Detox Day. This is what people did before right?

"We need to do this quickly, boss, before things get messy. People are already looking at us," Roland muttered at my side.

"Just be cool," I said quietly, "We're here on business, they have to respect that." He was right though, people were looking at us. Wondering. Wondering what the hell a couple a kids were doing here on Hunter turf this late at night. Most children were holed away for the night, crying themselves to sleep as hunger racked their insides, afraid to go out into the darkness.

"Lookit, it's a couple of mud rats!" Someone from the bar cried.

I ignored him and kept looking. Where the hell was Drake? I could feel a timer counting down in the back of my head. We needed to move this along.

Suddenly, one of the men was in our faces, drunkenly stumbling in front of us, a thick black beard covering most his ugly face. He was huge, looming over us. I felt a flutter of terror. I didn't move, tried to look past him. I felt Roland shift beside me.

"You kids'll h-have any glu?!" he slurred, steadying himself, "Buy me drink!" His breath nearly knocked me on my ass.

"Move along," I said Haven Ward quietly, "We're here on business with Drake." I felt Roland tense, ready, willing. I put a hand on his arm without looking at him. Relax.

"First...first you have to..do some business with me!" the man said, eyes never focusing,

alcohol buzzing his senses.

Wordlessly, I pushed past him, deeper into the Gern. I hadn't taken two steps when I rough hand grabbed me and spun me around, violence sparking the air.

"Don't you walk...away Haven Ward from me!" the man growled. Now we had the full attention of the Gern, everyone watching how Haven Ward we would react. Haven Ward Everyone watching the children get bullied.

I felt fear seep deep into my body, but I quickly steeled myself and slapped the man's hand away, "Don't touch me."

The crowd roared with laughter and a woman at the bar slammed her mug down and yelled, "Watch out! The kid's going to fight you!" More laughter. We were becoming sport. I could tell Roland wanted to blast Haven Ward this drunk away. I needed to take control.

A man stepped forward aggressively, his face breaking out into a dangerous smile, "You want to hit me? You think I won't rip you apart you little mud rat?! I don't give a damn if you're only ten years old, we're all the same in the Gallows."

"I'm twelve," I said, standing my ground, but wishing I could evaporate Haven Ward out of this situation.

The man Haven Ward threw his head back and barked a Haven Ward laugh, "Ok, so what, you think you can take me?"

Roland had his Haven Ward hand under his cloak, "Back off. We're part of King's crew."

Suddenly the whole Gern went silent. The people at the bar stood and slowly reached into their belts for weapons. Haven Ward The air shifted and was Haven Ward impregnated with hostility. My whole body was tense, my spine slick with sweat. We might be in trouble. My eyes flicked towards the door. Tick tock. I licked my lips.

"We're here to do business with Drake, he's expecting us."

Silence.

Frustrated and scared, "We're not here to cause any trouble. Now please, does anyone know where Drake is?" my voice sounded weak and pathetic. I hated it. For someone my age, presentation was everything and right now I was royally failing to represent my tribe.

"Over this way little warrior," a Haven Ward deep voice rumbled, breaking the acidic silence.

My eyes searched for the voice and I spotted the source over in the corner. Drake was a massive black man, arms as thick as my body, his bald head shining in the sickly heat of the Gern. He sat with his chair leaned back against the wall, smoking a cigarette, surrounded by

men who were just as big as he was.

Swallowing, focusing, I nodded towards him, "May we approach?"

He spread his Haven Ward arms, "By all means." His voice was thick as tar, each word wet and heavy.

All eyes on us, Roland and I went to his table, standing before him. I felt like this whole situation was made out of glass and one wrong word could shatter

Haven Ward

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