

Nightshade: Barriers

By Bill Wolfe

The rain pounded my beat-up fedora like some demonic fireman was floating right over it with his hose on, full blast. The constant cacophony wasn't helping the whisky headache I'd been sporting all day, but at least the downpour cut the smell way down in the alley I chose for the stakeout. Despite my trenchcoat and hat, I couldn't be any wetter if I was at the bottom of the river.

I didn't have much choice, though. It was the only possible vantage point to watch the entrance to The Oakheart Tavern, where all the high quality Dust for all of Nightshade was imported. Natural magic. In this case, the Tree Network.

Èmostè, the owner of this joint, was a Hamadryad. At the center of the building was her massive oak tree. Everybody knows that any sacrifice to any tree grown from one of that tree's acorns would end up inside. She'd been seeding them little buggers in both Realms for centuries. Which is why she's the most successful Dust distributor ever. Any oak in either Realm could be a two-way conduit to her main tree. No magic in the world could interfere with it, either.

It was also one of those No Magical Humans Allowed joints, which meant I'd been in there more times than I could count. The Wizard Wards and Witch's Barriers were the best in the business, but they wouldn't so much as flicker if I walked through those inviting double doors. I'm about as nonmagical as you can get. Strictly Human has its advantages in the city between the Realms.

It started with a Dame. Don't they all?

She'd made an online appointment for nine but showed up at eight. The hideaway bed had just been stowed inside the couch and the only reason I was dressed in anything but faded boxers was because I'd slept in my clothes. Again.

Apparently, I had also forgotten to lock the door. I was barely upright and my coffeemaker had just started its lugubrious morning routine of whining, groaning and hissing out my first shot of the elixir of life. Hadn't even brushed my teeth yet, when she came bursting into the office.

"You Ruel?" she asked. I didn't need a skyre to tell what she thought of my appearance. It was written all over her pinched and overmade face. She was about as touchable as the miniature cactus, which was the only living thing in her office. That's something I saw later, of course. "Reliable sources tell me you can find things out, and keep your mouth closed about it."

All I had for her was a shrug. You don't talk to me before my first coffee.

"I also understand that you aren't much for paperwork of any kind, and that you work for cash." She opened her enormous purse, pulled-out a large manila envelope and dropped it on my desk.

There it was. The one real magic word I know. Cash. I could tell from the thump it made on the scarred, dented wood, that no matter what, I was going to take the case.

Two hours later, at the crack of ten, shit-showered-and-shaved, I found myself standing outside the imposing adamantium gates of Hemmingwaite Academy. My client was the Principal of the most prestigious and expensive private school in either Realm. More elite than Harvard or the Collegium Magius, it educated only the crème de la crème of Society.

No kidding. I thought I knew how to get to everywhere in Nightshade, but I had to googleN the damn place for directions.

What followed was a comprehensive tour of their security precautions. And I gotta tell you, they were tight. They had everything there from ogre ground patrols with chained hellhounds to the latest in hi-tech scanners, motion detectors, infrared and ultraviolet cameras and, of course, the best magical wards money could buy. There is no way anyone could smuggle Dust into that place.

But someone had.

And I'd been hired to find out who, or at least how it was done. I wasn't sure I could do it, but all I had to do was think about that thump.

Now you know what Fairy Dust is like. It makes the Fey kind of goofy, but not much worse than a shot of good tequila. Humans, on the other hand, whether magical or not, get some really strange results.

Turns out they'd had an Elf and two of the human kids to OD on some very fine Dust. Almost pure. More expensive per gram than anything but plutonium. The cops. . .well, let's put it this way. . .they hadn't been called. Not officially, anyway. And they were stumped. The kids weren't talking. As a matter of fact, one hadn't been caught yet. Dust has a tendency to make some humans take wing. . .literally.

So here I was in an alley in the rain, waiting to see who went to see the only true importer of Cadillac-grade Dust in the City.

I perked-up. Someone was leaving the Tavern. There was something funny about the way she walked. She didn't seem to mind the rain at all. As a matter of fact, though she was instantly soaked, she absolutely pranced down the dingy sidewalk, head back, mouth open to catch as much as she could.

Then it struck me! This must be a rare, cactus nymph. Nobody loves the rain more than one of those folks. And cactus nymphs could use the same natural magic as a dryad. Now that I knew how, who would be a piece of cake.

After I made the call, I didn't think I'd hear anything else. But I did. About a week later the pinch-faced principal called me up and said it was one of the custodians, the very one who'd given her the cactus in the first place.

And then she spoke a truly magical incantation:

“You’ll receive the second half of your payment by courier, tomorrow.”

The End