

40 – Dichotomy

When Ward woke the following day, he did so in a warm bed with a warm sleeping companion, and he couldn't imagine feeling better about life. No, that wasn't true, he reasoned, shifting on his pillow to better look at Fay's slumbering countenance. Things were good at that moment, with his health and his love life, but he'd rather not have to leave to hunt down a thief and a murderer. Still, he'd lived long enough to grasp onto the small victories in life and savor them. Having the affection of a sweet, beautiful woman, no matter how fleeting, was cause for celebration in his book.

"That was quite a night," Grace said. Ward looked to the voice, saw her sitting at the foot of the bed, and scowled. In the heat of the moment, he'd caught glimpses, or, no, that was the wrong word; he'd felt her. He'd known she was "present" while he and Fay had been in the throes of passion, but he hadn't been able to make himself care—some biological imperatives made ignoring an unwanted presence a little too easy. Now, with his libido cooled, he wanted to tell her off, but he also wanted to let Fay sleep. Hoping it would sting more than an insult, he closed his eyes and put his head back on the pillow, ignoring her.

The bed was too comfortable, too warm, and he drifted back to sleep. The next time his eyes opened, he was alone in the bed. He yawned hugely and sat up, looking around. There wasn't any sign of Fay, but he supposed he shouldn't be surprised; she was probably down in the kitchen helping Fan with the morning rush. He slid out of bed, took a hot bath, dressed in another set of new clothes, and then went down to the common room. As he'd suspected, it was busy. It had to be mid-morning, much later than he was used to rising, so he grabbed one of the few empty tables, a small one near the stairs, then leaned back and took in the crowd.

He recognized some of the inn's regulars and some travelers he'd encountered previously. He also saw a lot of faces he wasn't familiar with, and he wondered if some locals regularly came by the inn for meals. He caught a glimpse of Fay dropping off some plates closer to the bar, but she hadn't noticed him yet. He smiled at the sight of her, amazed that someone so full of life and so . . . appealing had wanted to be with him. "You are ridiculous," Grace said, suddenly leaning back in the chair opposite his.

"Ah, there she is." Ward sighed and shook his head. "I shouldn't speak to you."

"What? You can't blame me for last night. It's not easy staying hidden, staying tucked away in that skull of yours when big things are happening—when your emotions are roiling, and your . . . body is . . . engorged with passion. I thought I did a good job staying out of sight." Her pauses before choosing her words were, Ward had to admit, kind of funny. On his way down from the room, he'd decided to let things go, anyway. What was the point of holding a grudge? Maybe she wasn't lying; maybe it was hard to stay "hidden."

"Well, I noticed you. Anyway, forget it; not worth ruining the morning over."

"Very mature, Ward." She made a show of looking over her shoulder, narrowing her eyes as she spotted Fay still talking to a customer near the bar. "Are we not wanting to talk about things? 'Cause that was something else. I was pretty impressed with your stamina, considering the moves she was pulling . . ."

"All right, all right. I said I forget it, not . . . whatever this is."

“Whatever. I wonder if she’s going to be as cool today while you’re heading out as she was yesterday. You reckon she’s expecting you to change your future plans now that you’ve had a taste of . . .”

“Damn it, Grace. Can you just chill?”

Grace sighed and leaned forward onto the table, resting her chin on her folded arms. “Oh, fine. You think Haley will make it back today?”

“She seemed to think she would. I hope so.” Ward couldn’t deny that he was enjoying himself in Tarnish, especially now that the hired killers had been dealt with, but he felt an urgency in his gut, a need to get moving and pick up Nevkin’s trail. He was saved from Grace’s next question when Fay laid eyes on him and started across the common room, wending her way between tables and fending off comments and questions from other patrons.

“Good morning, sleepy,” she said, clenching her hands before herself almost coyly.

“Hey,” Ward started to stand, and it must have been clear from his posture or facial expression that he meant to hug or kiss her, and she hurried forward, pushing against his shoulder, urging him to stay seated.

“No need to get up or make a scene, lover.” She winked at him. “Can’t go ruining a girl’s reputation when you’re about to skip town, right?”

“Ah,” Ward felt his cheeks flush. “Right. Yeah.”

Fay took pity on him and leaned down to kiss his forehead. “If you were sticking around, I’d shout it from the rooftops, but let’s keep things simple, hmm? I already spent the morning fending off Fan’s questions.”

“Sure, yeah, no worries.” Ward took her hand, the one on his shoulder, and gave it a squeeze.

“Hungry? I bet you are.” She winked at him, gently, surreptitiously, rubbing her thumb against his palm. Then she turned and sauntered toward the kitchen.

“Wow. Imagine that!” Grace laughed. “I’m pretty sure you got used last night, my friend.”

“Eh, worse things have happened.” Ward couldn’t stop the grin on his face. He’d secretly dreaded that Fay would be different this morning, that she’d be less okay with the transient nature of their encounter. It seemed he wasn’t the only one with motives.

“Um, just for the record, I know I give you a lot of grief, but I think you’re a pretty stand-up guy. Plenty of men in your shoes might have slipped out a window rather than come down here to see how things would shake out.”

“That’s a decent thing . . .” Ward started to say but cut himself off as the door jingled and Haley stepped into the inn, stomping her boots and pulling off a long, hooded cape. She scanned the room, and Ward couldn’t help thinking her face looked wan and gaunt, her eyes harried. When she saw him, she strode purposefully across the room toward his table, aiming for the empty chair. When she drew near, he could smell the musty scent of animals and the ozone-rich odor of the wind.

“Ward,” she said, pulling out the chair Grace had been occupying and sitting down. “We need to get on the road—I’ve got some people pursuing me.”

“Huh?” Ward had barely processed her coming into the inn. The idea that she was being chased seemed too strange to slot into his relaxed, morning mind.

“A cousin. Distant. He tried to lay claim to my parents’ holdings back in the valley. Said my father borrowed money a few years back and that the stables and country estate belonged to him now. He wasn’t pleased when I browbeat his steward into letting me take some horses and tack. Well,” she frowned and shrugged, “and some of my mother’s jewelry and my father’s sword.”

“Well, fuck that guy! Who would do that to a grieving daughter?”

“Sonder would. Sonder Yates is my father’s sister’s fourth son and the biggest bastard in the Copper Valley. I was leading the mounts up the back trail on the far side of my folks’ property when I caught sight of his men and their hounds. That was last night, and I rode hard straight here, trading mounts frequently to give them rest.”

“Jesus. Seriously? Well, let them catch up. I’ll have your back, and we can get the guard in on this. You didn’t do anything wro . . .”

“No!” Haley interrupted. “Ward, he has legal documents to back up his claim. The steward was adamant; Sonder sent a bailiff around, announcing the claim and his intention to catalog and auction my parents’ things. I had to threaten him to get into my parents’ vault, and I took . . .” She looked around and lowered her voice. “The sword I took is enchanted. It’s probably worth more than the country house.”

“Where is it?” Grace asked, and Ward had to admit it was a good question.

“Where is it?” he echoed.

“On my saddle just outside. I gave Tiff a few glories to hold them ready. We need to get going.” Tiff was one of the stable hands Fan employed.

“How far are they going to chase us?” Ward stood up, pushing his chair out.

“I don’t know. Not forever; they’re just mercenaries. They won’t want to travel too far beyond Tarnish.”

“Dammit,” Ward grunted, pushing his chair in.

“I’m sorry! I know you probably weren’t ready to leave right now.”

“Nah, it’s not that. The guy making my bullets isn’t done yet.”

“Let’s ride by his shop on the way out.” Haley was already walking to the door, and Ward wondered why she was so worried about a few hired mercenaries. Was it that, or was she worried they’d get the law on their side, and then she’d have a problem she and Ward couldn’t handle?

“I take it you won’t give up what you took?”

“Never!” She whirled to glare at him, speaking so sharply that the guy sitting at a nearby table almost choked on his eggs.

Ward held out his hands placatingly. “Easy. I get it. I gotta get my things, so maybe step outside and make sure no one messes with your things.”

She nodded and walked out, and Ward turned to the stairs. He’d just taken his first step up when Fay hurried over, calling, “Ward!”

“Stay strong!” Grace giggled, sitting atop the banister rail.

Ward turned to Fay and saw her flushed cheeks, slightly mussed hair, and the glint of her silver teeth as she smiled. “Not staying for breakfast?”

“Fay, yeah, I’m sorry, but I have to leave sooner than I’d hoped.”

“Now?” Her eyes widened.

“Haley just got back to town and has a kind of emergency. We have to head out.”

“Care to elaborate?”

“Can’t really. Better if I don’t, at least.” He shrugged, trying to look apologetic.

“Well, let’s go up. I’ll say goodbye upstairs.” At the idea of being alone with her again, Ward felt an electric tingle of excitement, and he found himself shaking his head ruefully as he took the stairs two at a time.

“You aren’t going to . . .” Grace started to say, but then she shook her head and laughed. “Well, a quick one might not hurt!”

Despite Grace’s interpretation of Fay’s words and Ward’s admittedly overzealous reaction, Fay had other ideas. As soon as they were off the landing, in the shadowy hallway, she grabbed Ward and pulled him into a hug. “I’ll miss you, Ward. I hope you come back this way again someday.”

Ward wrapped his arms around her, almost relieved that this was a simple goodbye. “I’ll miss you too, Fay. Thank you for helping me remember how great life can be.”

“Shh,” she said, reaching up to lightly grip the back of his jaw with her fingertips, pulling his face close. They kissed long and deep, and Ward savored the sensation, wondering if he’d ever kiss someone so sweet again. Her lips were better than anything he could remember, and when she pulled away, he tried to follow, stooping forward further and further as she laughed and retreated. “Thank you too, Ward. You were thoughtful and kind and ever so much fun.” Without another word, she turned and disappeared down the stairs.

“Wow,” Ward said, inhaling deeply, trying to remember what he was supposed to be doing.

Grace came to the rescue, “Okay, I’ll hand it to you; you did a number on that woman. Well, she did a number on you too. Come on, Ward! Daylight’s burning! Get your stuff!”

Five minutes later, Ward stood on the front stoop of The Hen’s Nest, his new leather backpack, stuffed with all his clothes and other belongings, on his back. His new hat shaded his eyes, and he held his long, sturdy spear in one hand, looking down at the cobbled street where Haley sat with her two horses. They were beautiful animals, both decked out with fine, polished leather tack, and bearing comfortable-looking, tooled leather saddles. Haley sat atop a bay mare with a gorgeous, flowing mane, and, just as she’d promised, she held the reins of a proud, tall dun stallion with a white star on his forehead.

“I haven’t ridden since I was a kid, and I wasn’t exactly good at it.”

“Well, I’ll give you some pointers,” Grace said, nudging him. He’d taken one step when the door slammed open, and Fan stormed out of the inn.

“Leaving without a word? You scoundrel!” She held a big wooden spoon in one hand and lifted it threateningly.

“Oh, shit, Fan! I meant to say goodbye but got all mixed up—Haley’s got a bit of an emergency, you see . . .”

“Oh, quiet, you oaf. I just wanted to see you off; you know you’re welcome back whenever you’re in town. Fay’s going to miss you.” Her wink said more than Ward wanted to know. Apparently, Fay hadn’t come up with a good excuse as to why she hadn’t come back to her room last night. “You wouldn’t be planning to skip out without settling your balance . . .”

“No, no!” Ward waved his hand in the air. “I left the glories in my room.”

“All right, then. Give us a hug.” She held out her arms, and Ward obliged, noting the strong scent of garlic and pepper in her hair as he pulled her close. “Stay safe!” she called to Haley as she backed away from Ward.

“We will!” Haley smiled and waved, and Ward wondered at the steel in the girl to put on a cheerful face after riding all night, knowing her cousin was trying to capitalize on the recent death of her parents. The idea of it pissed Ward off, and for the second time, he wracked his brain for a way they could stay and confront the little asshole and his hired thugs. He had to admit defeat, though, largely due to his ignorance of the laws and customs of the city and greater jurisdiction. If Haley thought the cousin’s claim was legitimate, he’d have to take her word for it and help her put enough distance between them to give up the chase.

He approached the big tan horse cautiously, moving close to his head. When the horse leaned down and snuffled at his neck, he reached up to scratch gently around his ears. “That’s a good boy, aren’t you?”

“He’s very gentle. Are you a good rider?” Haley asked, holding out the stallion’s reins for him to take.

“I’ll be honest, Haley; I haven’t ridden a horse in a good thirty years.”

Grace cleared her throat, and he turned to look at her. She was standing near the horse's hind leg. "Come on, Ward. Put your right foot in this stirrup, grab the saddle horn, and pull yourself up. Be confident. Horses can sense your mood."

Haley spoke almost simultaneously, "I adjusted the stirrups for you; they should be about right. Don't worry; we don't have to ride hard today. I'm sure I put a few hours between me and my cousin's men. They'll have to sleep eventually, too."

"Right." Ward did as Grace suggested and was pleased with the ease of the maneuver. His body was strong and limber, and the horse, as Haley had promised, was very well-behaved. "Nutmeg, right?"

"That's right! And this is Wind Queen. Isn't she beautiful?"

Ward was getting situated in the saddle, getting the reins right in his hands, but he glanced over at Haley's horse and nodded. "She's beautiful. Quite a name, too."

"I've had her for five years, and, well, the name seemed right back when I was a teen. Besides, she's very swift and . . ."

"Hey," Ward interrupted, "you named her perfectly. Don't feel self-conscious—that's a beautiful, regal horse, there."

Haley smiled brightly at him and nodded. Then she clicked her tongue, and Wind Queen began high stepping, kind of prancing down the cobbles. Ward laughed and gave Nutmeg a gentle bump with his heels. "Let's go, boy." Whether he'd said the right thing, or Nutmeg was just good at intuiting what his rider wanted, Ward didn't know, but he began to walk, quickly catching up to Haley's prancing show-off of a mount. "You know where the artificer's shop is?"

"Frine? Yes!" Haley led the way, Ward following close behind through the streets, their mounts' hooves clattering on the cobbles, clearing pedestrian traffic for them.

They were outside Mr. Frine's shop in minutes, and Ward nodded to Haley. "I'll be right out."

"Leave me your bag, and I'll secure it to your saddle."

"Right, thanks." Ward swung his pack off his shoulders and handed it over when Haley had dismounted. Looking at her horse, he saw she had good-sized saddle bags. A long sword with a dark leather scabbard was strapped to one of them. He couldn't see the blade, obviously, but the hilt, made of dark, polished wood, was long enough that someone could grip it with two hands. What really caught his eye, though, was the engraved silver pommel. "Ah, shit, that's a nice-looking sword."

Haley took Ward's pack and followed his gaze, looking back toward her mount. "It's a fine blade, won from a challenge by my great grandfather. No way I'm letting Sonder Yates get his clammy hands on it!"

Ward snorted at her use of the word "clammy" and nodded. "Don't worry." When he entered the shop, he found Mr. Frine hard at work on his ammunition but was disappointed to learn he'd only finished loading nine bullets. Ward explained his urgent need to depart, and Frine shrugged, offering to finish the other eleven bullets for him to pick up the next time he came to

town. Ward contemplated the offer, then shook his head. "Nah, just give me the empty casings. I'll get 'em filled when I get a chance."

"Very well. I have a small cask of the alchemical fire I'm using that I'll send with you, as well."

Ward thanked the man and loaded up his pistol with five of the new bullets, leaving his last Earth-made bullet in the ready position. He strapped the little cask of explosive crystals to Nutmeg's saddle beside his pack and then mounted up. Fifteen minutes later, they were trotting—painfully for Ward—up the road outside the northern city gates. "I'm going to be black and blue by the end of the day," he groaned.

"Move with the horse!" Haley laughed.

"C'mon, Ward," Grace said, suddenly in the saddle behind him. He felt her arms wrap around his waist, and she said, "Just try to move with me. I'll help you get the rhythm down." Ward wanted to protest, but he could already feel a difference. She held him tight, flexing her legs, pressing with feet that were also, somehow, in the stirrups. He could feel her movement, and he almost instinctively began to move with her. He appreciated the help, but with the very close, hands-on training, he felt warmth from her touch and caught himself enjoying it. Before he knew it, they were moving at a smooth, steady cantor, and Haley laughed, looking over at him.

"I thought you said you weren't a good rider!" she called.

Ward shrugged and laughed. "Grace is helping!"

Haley's eyes went wide, and Grace squeezed him tighter and said, "See? If you'll just relax and let me, I can be a lot of help."

Ward couldn't argue with that, but something in the back of his mind was alarmed by her proximity. While part of him enjoyed and even felt excited by it, another part recoiled from the warmth of her presence and the way his body responded. Most troubling was his awareness of this dichotomy, and he had no idea which part of himself to listen to.