

## 32 – Easy Answers

Ward wasn't sure how to feel about it when he made it the rest of the way to Haley's house without another city watch member stopping him and asking what he was doing. He supposed the dim lighting, and his quick passage might explain why nobody noticed the dried blood soaking his pants and shirt. Still, he felt like trudging through town with an unconscious man flopping on his shoulders should have set off some alarm bells. Nevertheless, sweating, legs burning, and back cramping, he finally stomped up the cobbled pathway to Haley's front door and set his burden down on the deck with a thud.

He knocked softly at first, but when nobody responded, he pounded with his knuckles a good deal harder. He could see through nearby windows that the house was dark and wondered if he'd come too late to avoid waking the neighbor lady he'd met earlier. He was about to knock a third time when a light flickered through the glass, steadily growing brighter as someone approached. The door clicked as someone unbolted it, and then he heard Haley's voice, "Who's there?"

"It's Ward!"

"Now you did it," Grace said. "She was probably sound asleep."

The latch clicked, the door swung inward, and there she stood, still in her pajamas, hair disheveled. "Something happen?"

"Yeah." Ward pointed to the unconscious thug. "This guy and his buddy jumped me. I figured they might have some relation to the guy who attacked you." Haley's eyes widened, and she pulled the door fully open.

As the light fell on Ward, she cried, "You're hurt!"

"Where's your neighbor?" Ward peered past her, suddenly wondering if she should even be out of bed.

"She had family in town. I told her I was fine."

"Jesus, Haley. You shouldn't be alone." Ward reached down, grabbed the thug's shirt collar, and lifted him partway off the ground. He gestured for Haley to back up, then dragged him into the foyer. "I didn't have any place else to take this guy without getting a lot more attention than I wanted."

"What do you intend—"

"I'm going to get some answers out of him."

Grace followed Ward inside, smirking at the insensate man hanging from Ward's grip. "He doesn't look up to answering any questions."

"Are you? Hurt, I mean?" Haley backed up, making room for Ward as he dragged the man further inside. She closed the door with a solid click. "Did you think about bringing him to the city watch?"

"I'm hurt, but I don't think too badly. It stopped bleeding a while ago. As for the watch, nah, I think I'll handle this myself. Are you worried I'll get you into trouble?"

"Not at all. If he's connected to the man who slew my parents, I'll string his entrails along our front fence."

"Quite an image." Ward pointed to his captive. "You got some rope or cord? I'd like to hogtie this asshole so I can take a minute to clean up."

"My father has—" her words got caught in her throat, and her mouth twisted in a quick, involuntary sob. "My father had some cord in his shop. I'll get it and something for your wound." She looked Ward up and down. "My father wouldn't mind if you borrowed a sweater and a pair of trousers. I think I can find something that will fit."

Ward looked at her closely, but she didn't seem upset by the idea. He figured she wouldn't have volunteered if it bothered her. "If you're sure, I'd appreciate it."

Ten minutes later, he'd securely tied the man's hands behind his back and then looped the rope around his ankles, bending his knees backward. His erstwhile attacker's arm was swollen and purple, and Ward didn't envy him; it was going to hurt like hell when he woke up. Leaving him face-down in the foyer, he followed Haley to the kitchen and sat at a long, wooden table while she got him some warm water and a clean towel. "You should be resting, not waiting on me. I hoped to deal with that guy while you slept, none the wiser."

"None the wiser? That's an interesting turn of phrase. Don't worry, Ward. I've been lying in bed all day. The cut-burn mended my flesh, and the tonic strengthened me. Even my wrist is working better. I'm a little sore and slow, but it's good for me to move around." She set the bowl of steaming water next to him and handed him the towel, then sat on the bench a couple of feet down.

Ward lifted his shirt, peering down at his stomach, fearing what he'd find. The cut was deep and gaped a little when he twisted to look at it better, but only a tiny trickle of blood leaked out of the puckered flesh. "Gods! You were stabbed?"

"C'mon, we saw worse in the catacombs." Ward began gently scrubbing the dried blood off his skin. When he looked up, Haley was gone. "Where'd she go?" He jerked his head left and right, but Grace had also wandered off. "What the hell?" Before he could begin to worry, Haley reappeared, padding silently in her bare feet. She set a small jar on the table, and he recognized it right away—it was just like the wound salve they'd left behind in her pack. "Ah, shit. Thanks, Haley."

"Speaking of the catacombs, your other wounds all healed? Mine were—nothing but scars left."

"Yeah. I guess whatever magic made us sleep for more than a month didn't slow our healing." Ward unscrewed the little jar and scooped some salve onto his cut. He could tell the knife didn't go through his stomach muscles; it wasn't like his insides were in any danger.

"I'd give your captive some tonic to wake him, but we don't have any on hand."

“Nah, let him sleep it off. Hey, how uncommon is it for thugs to jump someone in this town? You think he’s related to what happened here?”

“Thugs...I like your descriptive language, Ward. Well, it’s not common in this area. What happened to my family is something that will be talked about for months. You getting jumped by ‘thugs’ in the night while you meander through alleys? That wouldn’t be very newsworthy. Unless they killed you, I suppose—not many murders in Tarnish.”

“Well, they were sure swinging those knives like they meant to kill me. I guess we won’t know until I twist that guy’s thumbs.”

“You’re going to twist his thumbs?”

“It’s a figure of speech. Let’s just say I’m going to get some answers out of him.”

“I’ll be right back. I promised you some clothes.”

“Oh hey. If it’s any trouble, I’m probably going to head back to the inn soon, anyway—”

“Nonsense. It’s nothing.” Haley silently glided out of the room, her passage reminding Ward of a ghost. She was so subdued and her trauma so palpable that he kept wishing he had a card for counseling services he could hand off to her. He sat back down on the bench, annoyed at himself for bothering her. A moment later, she returned carrying a thick, olive-green sweater.

“I’m sorry, but I underestimated the difference between you and my father. His pants aren’t going to fit you. This sweater should cover most of the blood, though.”

Ward took the offered garment, noting how Haley’s hands lingered as though she didn’t want to let it go. He almost pushed it back to her but knew that would probably just exacerbate things. “This is perfect. Thank you.” It wasn’t chilly in the house, but it wasn’t hot, either. Ward pulled the sweater over his head and smoothed the front with his palms. “How’s it look?”

“Perfect. It was always too big for him, but it looks right on you.”

“Great. I love it—really soft.” Ward heard a muffled grunt from the direction of the foyer and stepped that way. “You got a basement by any chance?”

“A wine cellar.”

“That’ll be just right. I think my guest is waking up.” He continued through the short hallway and into the foyer. Sure enough, face crimson with the effort, Ward’s captive was silently straining against his bonds. “Forget it, buddy; those knots aren’t coming undone.”

He stopped straining with a gasp for air, then twisted his neck to look at Ward. “Let me go.”

“Maybe. Eventually. Depends on how you answer my questions.” Ward had no intention of letting him go, at least not free. He might dump him off with the city watch when he was done with him, though. He looked at the hogtied man and considered hoisting him up so he could carry him down to Haley’s cellar. He didn’t relish the idea, so he picked up the bloody shirt wrapped around the two knives and fished one out. “I’m going to untie your ankles so you can

walk a short distance. Don't mess around, or I'll show you how having one of these poked into you feels."

"Eat the shit from a swine's ass, you bastard!"

"How crude!" Grace cried, making her usual unannounced appearance. Ward ignored her and the thug's descriptive barnyard vulgarity and sliced the thin rope he'd wrapped around his ankles. He grabbed his uninjured arm and hoisted him to his feet. His captive's arms were still bound, and it must have torqued his broken elbow because he cried out, then panted and gasped in genuine pain.

"Easy. Just move with me, and it won't hurt so much." Ward looked back to the hallway leading to the kitchen and saw Grace standing beside Haley. "Cellar that way?"

Haley's face was pale, her eyes wide, and she jumped a little when Ward spoke. He wondered what she'd been thinking about and, for the second time, cursed himself for bringing his captive to her so soon after the ordeal she'd been through. "This way." She turned and hurried toward the kitchen, leading Ward into a big, walk-in pantry with a large, wooden trapdoor on the floor. She lifted it, and Ward pushed his struggling, cursing captive toward the narrow flight of wooden steps.

"Down you go." When the thug resisted, he gripped his shoulders and leaned close, hissing into his ear, "Listen, asshole. You tried to kill me, and I won't feel a bit guilty about pushing you down some steps. Get walking, or you'll probably have a few more broken bones." The man stopped pushing against him and complied, carefully stepping down with Ward close behind. Once he'd gotten him down into the surprisingly large space beneath the house, he brought him over to one of the wooden support beams and used the rope he'd cut from his ankles to tie his wrists to it.

That done, he looked around, noting the stone block walls and floor, the many racks of dusty wine bottles, and the sturdy wooden beams holding up the floor of the house. "No windows, buddy, so scream all you want, I guess."

"What are you going to do with me?" Some fear had entered the thug's narrow eyes as he looked around into the dark corners of the cellar.

"I'm going to get some answers out of you. If you cooperate, you might keep breathing. If you lie to me, I'm going to start breaking more of your bones." Ward glanced behind him, glad to see that only Grace sat on the wooden steps in the little pool of light that fell into the cellar from the kitchen above. Did Haley go back to bed? He hoped so.

As if she could read his mind, Grace said, "Haley stopped following you in the pantry. If you pay attention, you can hear her in the kitchen. I think she's cooking something."

"What answers?" Ward's captive asked in a breathless grunt, trying to shift his arm into a more comfortable position.

"Who told you to kill me?" Long ago, Ward had learned that it was best to start an interview acting like you knew more than you did. If the thug assumed Ward knew he'd targeted him for assassination, they might be able to skip a lot of the early back and forth. To further muddy the

waters, he offered a lie, “Your partner already told me you were the one who planned it, the one with the contract.”

“What? You have Gil, too?”

“Sure. He’s with my partner. You saw her, right? I’ve got to tell you, she’s in a bad mood. You’d be dead already if it were up to her, but I said you deserved a chance to tell your side of the story. So? Was Gil telling the truth?”

“Contract? There was no contract! Foyle just gave us each a hundred crowns and said to rough you up, cripple you if we could, kill you if we couldn’t.”

Ward masked his surprise at the easy answer. He nodded, rubbing his chin. “Yeah, I’ve already got some friends looking for Foyle, thanks to Gil spilling the beans while you were unconscious. Still, he said you made the plan to knife me in the alley. How’d you know I’d be there?”

“Huh? No! We followed you! Foyle said, ‘The big stranger with a touch of mana at the Hen’s Nest.’ We hung around outside, walking back and forth for hours like a couple of idiots ‘til we saw you go in with the barmaid.” He grimaced and groaned for a minute, carefully shifting to try to take some weight off his injured arm. Ward frowned, and the man kept speaking, “After that, Gil sat inside and listened; he heard the innkeeper telling you to head out the north gate, so we hurried ahead of you.”

“So, a hundred glories to ‘cripple or kill’ me, huh?”

“Times are hard for laborers. People are clutching their purses tight; hardly any new buildings going up. You think we like doing stuff like this? I got mouths to feed, you know!”

Ward snorted. “You won’t find sympathy here, buddy. You wanna earn some mercy from me? Tell me where to find Foyle in case my friends turn up empty-handed.”

“You don’t know Foyle?” He frowned and then shook his head, licking his lips, and Ward noticed his upper lip, forehead, and neck were covered in a thin sheen of sweat; the guy was hurting and probably going to lose consciousness soon if he didn’t get some medical attention. “Never mind. I forgot you’re a stranger. Foyle’s a bookmaker—he runs bets on dog fights, horse races, bare-knuckle matches, you name it. You can find him in the south district near the brick masons. He has an office where he sells insurance for folks going into the catacombs.”

“You don’t know why he wanted me dead?”

“No, sir.”

“What’s your name?”

“Arn. Could I please get some pain tonic? My arm’s throbbing something fierce. I can feel it thumping with every heartbeat!”

“You’ve been pretty cooperative, Arn. I’ll see what I can do.” Ward looked around the room and spotted a small barrel near one of the wine racks. He dragged it over beside Arn. “Sit on this. If you hold still, your arm will hurt less.” While the man stammered his thanks, Ward went upstairs to find Haley in the kitchen, frying a slice of ham in a pan over an open gas flame on the

stovetop. It was such a normal thing to see in a kitchen that, for a moment, he felt a little disoriented, like he was back on Earth. He hadn't thought about home in a while, and the sensation left him standing there, stupefied, for several seconds.

"Well, he was cooperative, at least. Are you really going to help him with his pain? I think you should just strangle him." Grace's ruthless commentary snapped Ward out of it, and he spun on her.

"I don't work that way, and you should know it by now."

Before Grace could respond, Haley said, still looking down at her frying ham, "Are you talking to Grace?"

"Yeah."

"What're you arguing about?"

"Yes, Ward, tell her what we're arguing about." Grace moved over and hopped on the table, resting her bare feet on the bench.

"Grace thinks I should strangle that guy and be done with him. I'm planning to drop him off with the city watch."

"He's not the one who attacked my family, so I don't care." Haley shrugged. "Do you want some ham?"

Ward remembered he'd promised Fan to return to the inn for dinner. He supposed he wasn't late yet, but he probably should get going soon. "No. Thank you anyway. Um, I don't want to let this guy go yet because he might tip off the next piece of the puzzle—some guy named Foyle."

"Foyle is behind this?" Haley spun. "I've seen his offices before, heard people talk about him. He runs bets for the derbies."

"More than that, from what I gather. Our little friend down there is talkative, hoping for some pain tonic. Do you care if I keep him here until I can talk to Foyle?"

"I don't mind, but you should proceed with caution. Foyle will have some muscle. I'd be surprised if he doesn't have a sorcerer on staff."

Images of the dueling monks flashed through Ward's mind. "Like a strong one? The kind that can shoot beams of fire?"

"Oh, I doubt it. Someone with enhanced strength and speed, though. Someone like you. If not, he definitely has a few Gopah practitioners. It was at the dojo that I learned his name." She twisted a brass knob, stifling the flow of gas to her burner, and turned to him. "Wait a day, and I'll come with you. I just need this wrist to mend. In the morning, I'll visit an alchemist for some bone mend cream and a pain tonic for your prisoner. I'll secure him with something stronger, too, once he's on the mend."

Ward scratched at the stubble on his jawline and sat down next to Grace's feet, thankful that the devil hadn't been trying to talk to him at the same time as Haley. "I think that's a good plan. Give me a day to get some equipment. Get yourself healed up, and then we'll visit Foyle together."

"I want justice for my parents, and if that man hired the one who killed them, I don't plan to be gentle."

Ward looked into her eyes. They were very dark in the dim kitchen light. Slowly, he nodded. "I don't blame you. Just let me get some answers out of him before you break his neck." The words felt strange yet comfortable coming from his lips and almost sent him into a disoriented spiral. When had he gone from trying to enforce laws to seeking vigilante justice? Was it the ineffectual-seeming city watch? Was it his concern for Haley? He'd never had to deal with a crime so personal before—

Haley spoke, stopping his ruminations in their tracks. "Of course. I want to confirm that Nevkin started this. If he didn't, I'd like to know who."

"Okay, it's a deal. You sure you're good if I head back to the inn for now?"

She picked up the thick slice of ham from her cast iron pan and bit a chunk out of it, chewing noisily. As she swallowed, she nodded. "I'll be fine. I slept most of the day, so I doubt I'll sleep more tonight. There's an alchemist nearby, and he's a family friend. He'll be up with the dawn."

Ward stood and gestured to the sweater he was wearing. "It's okay if I wear this for now?"

"Keep it. I'll have to do something with all of my father's things eventually." Her voice was steady and carried a much different tone than earlier. She sounded almost angry, and Ward knew it was because she was contemplating what they'd spoken about—finding Foyle and getting some answers.

"Listen, Haley." He walked closer and reached out, gently grasping her shoulder. "Promise me you aren't going to do anything without me."

Her eyes widened, and her somber face brightened a little as she smiled. "I'm just sore, angry, and sad. I'm not stupid. I'll wait, and we'll go together."

"Right. Okay, then. I'll come by tomorrow sometime after my new clothes are delivered—"

Haley interrupted him, shaking her head. "I have to see a tailor in that part of town. Why don't I stop by the inn? I won't leave until I've secured that man downstairs with some chains."

"Okay. Deal. See you tomorrow at the inn sometime. If I'm not there, wait for me; I have a few errands to run." Ward gave her shoulder one more squeeze, then, with her following behind, he walked to the front door and out into the cold night air. He turned and offered her a final smile. "Nite."

"Nite, Ward." She smiled half-heartedly and clicked the door shut.

"Think she's going to be all right?" Grace asked.

“I guess.” Ward turned and started crunching over the gravel to the cobbled path. “She lost her parents less than a day ago—almost died, herself.” The more he thought about it, the crazier it seemed that she was even up and about. “She’s a tough chick, you know that?”

“Chick, Ward? Really? How about a tough person? It’s not like a man would cope better—”

“I didn’t mean that! Shit, cut me a little slack, would ya?”

“I am cutting you some slack! I didn’t hit you, did I?”

Ward laughed and cracked his knuckles while walking briskly through the chilly, dimly lit streets. He was hungry but also excited; it felt like he was on a case with no lieutenant to answer to. He was looking forward to meeting this Foyle character and seeing Haley get some justice.