

38 – Secrets Uncovered

The words shivered and shook their way out of Ward's mouth, and it felt like they took some of his flesh with them. As they emerged into the world, they cracked and rippled through the air, resounding, sliding over, and caressing the walls, floor, and ceiling. Ward heard them through ears that rang and past a thick fog of pain that exploded in his head—the worst headache he'd ever felt. The room tinted red as capillaries burst in his eyes, and he shed tears of blood. His body trembled and shook, darkness closed around him, and faintly, he heard Grace cry, "Drink the tonic!"

His hand shook while he fumbled it off the table, and as he pulled the cork and tilted it toward his mouth, he began to notice the weird magic the spell had wrought. Puddles of greenish-blue, misty light were forming in the room, one near the bathroom door and one in the bed next to Haley. As the tonic, warm, fizzy, and flavored like a tart lemon, slid down his throat and began to work immediate wonders for his headache and the trembling of his fingers, he watched the pools grow and rise up, taking the shapes of translucent, foggy people.

The one on the bed stretched to create the forms of two people: a young, skeletally thin woman, her eyes sunken in dark hollows on her blue-green, smoky face. And a man, heavysset, with a long mustache who straddled her. "What the fu..." Ward trailed off as the man leaned close to the thin woman's face, and his thick, smoky hands drifted to her neck, grasping it, twisting and squeezing while she thrashed beneath him. Her choked sobs and his feverish grunting came seconds after their weird, ghostly forms mouthed the utterances, echoing up as though from a deep well, muffled by distance and distorted by whatever bizarre passage they traversed.

Ward hadn't noticed at first, but the sound of the spell echoing in the room had woken Haley. Now, as the figures beside her on the bed thrashed and struggled, she leaped up, eyes wide with horror as she took in the strange scene. When they settled on Ward, she cried, "What's happening?"

"Stop him!" Grace screamed, pushing Ward. He stumbled toward the bed and made to grab the man by the braided knot of hair hanging from the back of his head, but his fingers passed through him like smoke.

"They're not real." He turned to the other figure, which had formed on the floor. "Check him out." He pointed at the man busily prying up a floorboard with the tip of a broad, sharp-looking knife. He walked over to him to get a better view, beginning to form an idea about what was happening; he'd cast a spell to reveal secrets, and it was showing them a couple of things that had happened in that room, things that, for one reason or another, the magic considered secrets.

"Ward! What's happening!" Haley asked again, hurrying away from the bed and the ghostly struggle still taking place there.

"My spell. It's revealing secrets. I guess some guy choked a woman in that bed—" Ward snapped his mouth shut and hurriedly lifted an arm over Haley's shoulders, pulling her close. "Never mind that one. Look at this guy. He's gonna hide something under that floorboard, I bet."

"This is freakin' amazing!" Grace cried, walking around the room, obviously struggling to decide which phantasm to pay attention to. "I wonder... If that's a secret," she gestured to the bed, "how did he explain what happened? You should ask Fan about it!"

"I will, but look!" Ward wanted to get Haley's attention away from the violent struggle in the bed. He thought it was a little too close to what her mom had been through just a day ago, and he didn't want to trigger some kind of trauma.

They watched as the slight, hooded phantom at his feet finally pulled up the floorboard and then deposited a pouch. He pressed the floorboard back into place, pounding the nails back into their holes with the pommel of his knife. Seconds later, the phantasm faded into blue-gray wisps of smoke that disappeared in a handful of seconds. He looked up, saw Grace and Haley both staring at the wooden floor, and jerked his head back to the bed. The man and woman were gone; the mysterious phantom's crime was once again secret. "Except we saw him."

"What?" Haley looked back to the bed and then around the room as though she expected more spectral figures to materialize.

"Oh, Grace made the point a minute ago that we should ask Fan what happened. I mean, about that woman in the bed. She might know who that guest was. The man might have lied about what happened to her."

"You cast the spell? Was it as bad as in the catacombs? Did it almost kill you?" She was staring at his face, and Ward reached up to rub his cheeks, sure there were blood trails on them.

"No, not as bad. It hurt like hell, and I'm glad I had that tonic, but I don't think I would've died."

She stared up at him, peering into his eyes, and Ward had the urge to look away; the look felt almost too intimate. "Well, at least you had plenty of mana. Your eyes are still glowing."

"Ah. If I use up my supply, they'll stop?" Ward searched his mind for the magical words he'd spoken, wondering if he still had the spell ready to cast, but it was gone, just fragmented syllables in his memory, parts of words he couldn't quite remember.

Grace replied before Haley could, "Only until you recover. Your mana will never permanently leave you, remember?"

"Yes, I think so. In all the stories, you can tell when a sorcerer is tired because his or her eyes will stop glowing." Haley nodded, reaching for his face as though to help him with the blood, but she stopped her hand short. Awkwardly, she pulled it back and pointed toward the floor. "What an interesting spell! I wonder what that man was hiding."

"Let's see if it's still there!" Ward laughed, snatching up his knife from the trunk at the foot of the bed. He pulled it from its sheath and knelt by the floorboard. As he worked to slip the tip of the blade between the boards, he saw the old, dust, and grime-filled chips where a knife, sometime in the past, had done the same. When he pushed the blade through and pried the board up, he couldn't believe his eyes when he saw the stash of valuables in the dusty, cobwebbed space. The pouch was there, but so were several necklaces, rings, and bracelets.

"Woah!" Grace said, squatting down to look into the gap between joists. "Some thief was using this room as his stash? What are the odds?"

Haley, too, leaned close. "Why didn't he ever come back for his treasures? There must be a decade's dust on those things."

“Well, if thieving in this world is anything like back home, I can imagine why he never came back—dead or in prison.” Ward reached into the space and gathered up the objects. As he set the various pieces of jewelry on the floorboards, Haley picked them up and started blowing the dust off them. Ward hefted the pouch, grinned at the weight, and shook it, eliciting the tell-tale sound of coins clinking. When he opened it, he found mostly copper glories but half a dozen silver ones. All told, they totaled nearly a hundred. “Well, considering the potion cost me twenty-five glories, I’d say that spell paid for itself a few times over!”

“This is amazing!” Haley breathed, turning a golden ring set with several tiny, precious-looking green gemstones.

Grace made a humming sound, watching Haley admire the ring. “I wouldn’t expect to find a treasure like that every time the spell’s cast. As I said, this is a pretty big coincidence…”

“Yeah, I know, Grace.” Ward winked at Haley. “She says I shouldn’t expect to find a treasure every time I cast that spell.”

Haley giggled. “No, I’d say you were lucky this time.” Ward was happy to see her smiling, and he was glad the murder in the bed wasn’t the only secret revealed about the room. He slipped the floorboard back into place, and, just as the thief had done in the weird spectral vision, he pounded the two nails in with the hilt of his knife.

“How about we grab something to eat, Haley?”

“I’m starving!” She jumped to her feet, holding out her fist full of jewelry to Ward. He walked over to his pack and opened a side pocket. “Just dump ‘em in here for now.” She dumped them into the pocket, but he saw she still gripped the one with the green gemstones in her other hand, and before she could put it into the pack, he stopped her.

“You like that one?”

Haley held up the little gold ring. Ward figured it might fit his pinky, but it looked just right for one of her thin fingers. The three green stones were tiny, probably not worth much at all, but it was a pretty thing. “I like it, but—”

“Just keep it. This is all a windfall, anyway. Besides, we’re celebrating; I learned my first spell!” Ward grinned and buttoned up the pack, then picked up his coat. “I’m hungry!”

“Wash your face, dummy. You have blood coming out of your ears.”

That wiped his smile away. “Grace just called me a dummy and told me to wash my face.”

Haley laughed, but she didn’t look at him. She turned the ring between her fingers, studying it. “I’ll wait here. Thank you for the ring, Ward.”

“Don’t mention it.” Ward went into the bathroom and, as Grace suggested, washed the blood off his face and ears.

While he was at it, his personal devil badgered him, “You think it’s smart giving rings to girls?”

"It's not like that."

"I know, I know, you're just sharing the loot, but you know girls have funny feelings about jewelry. Don't give her the wrong idea. That's all I'm saying."

Ward dried his face on a hand towel and looked at her, narrowing his eyes. "You worried about her or me?"

"Definitely her!"

He laughed and threw the towel on the counter. "Man, your tune has sure changed."

"She's starting to remind me of Verity, and I hate to see all the suffering she's going through."

"Relax, Grace. I agree." Ward walked out of the bathroom to find Haley standing where he left her, eyes vacantly staring at the window. "You ready?"

"Hmm?" She jerked her gaze toward him, and he could tell he'd broken her out of some deep thoughts. "Yes!" She held up her left hand to display the ring on her pointer finger. "Fits!"

"Ah, nice. If you need money, don't feel bad about selling it, though."

"I don't." She smiled, walked to the door, and opened it. "Food's good here?"

"Yeah, Fan's a great cook." Ward followed her, and a few minutes later, they were sitting in the common room at a table near the fire, waiting as Fayella finished speaking to some customers near the door.

When she came near the table, Haley surprised Ward when she jumped up and grabbed her into a hug. "Fay! Thank you so much for cleaning that...mess for me. I couldn't bear to go back upstairs all day."

"It's nothing! Willard did most of the work, and he thought it was easy compared to what Fan puts him through here at the inn."

"I know that's not true, but thank you for saying it." Haley gave her another squeeze, then sat back down.

"Well!" Fay said, grinning at Ward, "Don't you look handsome! What a difference! I'm used to you resembling a wandering vagabond down on his luck, but here you are, clean and wearing fine, tailored clothing. I'm not sure if I should curtsy and address you as milord or—"

"All right, all right. That's enough of that." Ward laughed and gestured to Haley. "Don't keep the poor woman starving, Fay. How about something good to eat, hmm?"

"Of course, fine sir!" She curtsied and turned to saunter toward the kitchen. After a few steps, she stopped and turned, "Any objection to the house menu, milord?"

Haley snorted, and Ward sighed. "Whatever you suggest, fair maiden." His words brought a bark of laughter out of Fay, and she left the room blushing. There were probably fifteen or so other patrons in the common room, and it was pretty noisy, so no one paid them any attention.

Ward looked to the little raised platform in the corner where a band had been playing the last couple of nights, but it didn't look like anyone was setting up. "No music tonight?"

Haley followed his gaze. "Is there usually?"

"Well, they've been crowded, as you can see." Ward waved his hand around the room. "I guess there's a festival going on, right? Anyway, yeah, since we've been back, they've had a band playing in the evenings."

"Oh, right. Harvest Fest." Haley looked down, and Ward saw her lip begin to tremble. He could tell she was looking at a painful memory. "My brother and I used to love..."

When she hesitated, and Ward heard her voice begin to tremble even more, he spoke over her, "Hey, don't think about that right now. Give yourself a little time. Let's talk about something else. How about Gopah? Wanna tell me about that? I noticed your hands weren't hot today. Is it hard to charge them up?"

"Hmm? Charge them up? That's a fun way of thinking of it." Haley smiled and clasped her hands together, rubbing her thumbs over each other. "It's not hard. I just didn't do my forms this morning."

"Ah, good to know." Ward nodded, suddenly feeling awkward, like he had to fill the silence to keep her mind off her family tragedy. He decided to turn the conversation toward their next destination. "What's north of here?"

"Many places! I suppose, most commonly, when people go north from Tarnish, they're heading to Port Granite." She frowned. "Are you wondering about Nevkin?"

"Yeah. Any challenges near there?"

"Not that I've heard of, and, them being only a few days away by caravan, I'd think I'd have heard. Still, there's a railway hub there, and I know there are challenges to the east, bigger towns and cities, too."

"Ah! Really? Maybe that's why Nevkin took off that way. Hopefully, I'll get a few more answers out of that Foyle character, assuming it was Nevkin who put him up to, you know, his bad behavior." Ward paused and looked around to see if people were listening to him. When he didn't see any patrons looking their way, he added, "I think I'll pay him a visit tonight, get the jump on him, so to speak."

"My wrist isn't fully mended—"

"Yeah, I know. You're staying here."

Haley scowled furiously. "Ward, I—"

"Uh-uh, listen! You've had a rotten couple of days, and, as you know, you're not exactly even-tempered right now. I think I'll get more done if I'm alone, and I honestly don't think it would be good for you to be involved. Do you trust me?"

Capping his statement with that question was a dirty trick, but it worked. Haley's scowl evened out, and she reached up to cover her eyes with a hand, clearly trying to avoid looking at him directly. "I trust you. I...I'm worried, however. If something happened to you, too, so soon after..." As she trailed off, suddenly Grace was standing next to her chair, wrapping an arm over Haley's shoulders.

"You better reassure her, old man."

Ward scowled at Grace, but he reached over the table to grab Haley's free hand, the one she wasn't hiding behind. "Hey. Hey, cut it out. I'm going to be fine. I'm a tricky old bastard; it's not me you should be worried about."

"Why do you do that? Call yourself old?"

"I mean, I'm not *really* old, but compared to you, I am. I've been through some shit, all right?" He chuckled and changed the subject, "Grace is hugging you right now. I bet she wishes you could feel it."

Haley dropped her hand, and her eyes opened wide, her embarrassment forgotten. "She is?"

"Yeah. Problem is, only I can feel her. I guess that must get old pretty fast." Ward directed the last statement toward Grace.

She sighed. "It does, Ward. I could feel it if you hugged her, though. I can feel her hand in yours."

"She wants you to know she can feel your hand in mine. I guess since she's, well, living in me, it works like that."

"I can tell you're trying to keep me from arguing with you, but Ward, remember what I said about Foyle having bodyguards?"

"Yeah, I remember. Don't worry, I'm not stupid. I'll take a look, see what I can see, and if I can get to him, I'll do it. If I can't, then I'll do some more planning, all right?"

Haley nodded, and he could see she wanted to say something more, but further discussion on the topic was forestalled by the arrival of Fan carrying a tray of food and Fay following behind with a tray of drinks. Fay paused to drop most of the drinks off at another table while Fan set the plates of smoked ham, vegetables, and fresh-baked bread in front of Ward and Haley.

"Looks great!" Ward rubbed his hands together.

"I hope so! I'm glad to see you didn't blow yourself up. Did your magic work?"

"Oh yeah! It did, and I have a question for you."

"Really?"

"Yep. Did a very thin woman die in the room I'm staying in? She would have been staying with a middle-aged, heavysset man with a long mustache and long hair that he wore in a braid—"

“Yes! When I was much younger and working here as a serving girl!” Fan pulled out one of the empty chairs and sat down as Fay arrived with their drinks. She continued, “The woman was a noble lady from the Golden Bounds. If I recall, she was on her way north to seek treatment for a wasting disease. It was something of a local scandal when she died in her sleep. Her brother, that’s the man you described, departed the next day with her body. I believe he returned home, canceling their journey.”

“Huh.” Ward debated describing what he’d seen in his vision, but before he could weigh the pros and cons, Haley spoke up.

“Ward’s magic uncovered the truth: That man strangled her!”

“*Truly?*” Fan’s eyes almost bugged out of her head, and Fay nearly spilled a pitcher of beer, dropping it with a sloshing splash that splattered Ward’s plate.

“I’m so sorry!” Fay reached for his plate, but Ward stopped her.

“It’s fine. It’ll probably taste even better now.” He nodded toward Haley and Fan. “Yep, that’s true. I don’t have any evidence, and the crime is pretty old, so I don’t think we can do much about it, but yeah, it’s true.” He shrugged and took a big drink of his frosty ale. He supposed that if he were being truly good, he’d tell Fan and Fay about the thief’s stash he’d found, but Haley didn’t mention it, and neither did he. They’d need money in their pursuit of Nevkin and their hunt for more challenges. It wasn’t like those things had been stolen recently, nor that they belonged to anyone he knew.

“I wish we could do something. What a shame.” Fan sighed and stood. “Let’s leave ‘em to their meal, Fay.” Ward saw Fay’s eyes dart from him to Haley and back again, and it seemed she was a little reluctant to leave, but she nodded and started away.

“Fay!” Haley reached out and grabbed her wrist before she could leave.

“Hmm?”

“Do you want to join us? Ward’s going out to handle some errands soon, and I could use the company.”

“I am?” Ward chuckled and shook his head. “I mean, yeah, I am.”

“Fan?” Fay asked, looking imploringly at her aunt.

“Oh, go ahead. I’ve been working alone most of the day; you might as well have the evening off.”

“Thank you, Auntie!” Fay hugged her, and Ward laughed. The laugh felt good, and his smile broadened further when he saw the spark of happiness in Haley’s eyes as she watched the two women embrace. It was good, he supposed, that Fay would be around to keep Haley company. He’d talk her into staying at the inn for the night while he cleaned things up at her house, and then he’d pay Foyle a visit. He was feeling good after his success with the spell, and he couldn’t see himself sleeping anytime soon, anyway. No, he decided, it was time to take the offensive on these thugs—time to get some real answers.