

They rode until noon before resting, and despite Grace's help, Ward's tailbone, glutes, and thighs were killing him. "Not sure how much further I can go today, at least on horseback. I can walk, though. Hell, I can jog."

Haley looked at him from where she stood near the bank of a small river the road passed over. They'd taken a short side trail down to the embankment so the horses could drink and they could stretch their legs. "Really? I suppose you're probably pretty sore if you haven't ridden a horse in a long while . . ."

"Yeah. My ass is killing me."

"Baby," Grace teased, sitting atop Nutmeg's saddle, looking far too comfortable.

"I mean, if you think they're really about to catch us, I could suffer through it." Ward scowled, annoyed that Grace's quip had gotten to him so easily.

"We should be far ahead of them. They'll have to ask around in town when they arrive. Their mounts will be tired. They'll be tired . . ." She trailed off, listing the reasons on her fingers, and, as she closed her fist and rummaged in her pack for something, added, "They'll probably rest for the night soon. There's no way they'll catch us before then. They can't exactly track us on the North Road—far too much traffic." She produced a foil-wrapped, loaf-shaped package and walked over to Ward. "Got some travel food."

"Smart. I didn't get a chance to shop for provisions, but Fay mentioned there were lots of stops along the way up north."

"That's true. We're near Children's Crossing. There's an inn and stables there—probably a few roadside stands, too."

"Children's Crossing?"

"It's a ford in the Gravelwash River. It's the shallowest section. I suppose that's where the name came from; even a child could ford the river there."

"Is it too much to hope we might stop there?" Ward desperately wanted to take a hot bath.

"Nope. We'll stop for three or four hours. That should give a healing salve time to work on your bruising." Ward couldn't miss the sly smile as she looked back toward her horse, gently stroking her long mane.

"That a funny image for you? Me rubbing healing salve all over my bruised ass?" Ward laughed, also finding the thought funny. "I don't want to use up . . ."

"I brought several jars. Remember I went to buy some healing tonic for that thug before . . . before . . ."

"Forget it." Ward didn't think she needed to dwell on that memory. "All right. Should I put some of that stuff on now or wait 'til we get to the crossing?"

"Wait. We'll make sure you're good and bruised up so you heal back tougher." She put a foot in her stirrup and swung back into the saddle. "Ready?"

“Yeah.” Ward wanted to say no, pain lancing through his hamstrings as he lifted his leg into the stirrup and pulled himself back into the saddle. Still, he grimaced through it and forced himself to use his legs, pressing with his feet to move with Nutmeg’s gait as he climbed back up the slope to the road and then over the little bridge. The foliage was thick along the road there, likely due to the nearby stream, and everything seemed familiar and different at the same time to Ward.

The trees were green with leaves of all sorts, and some looked like they might be analogs of those on Earth. Ward wasn’t a tree expert, but he could recognize a maple leaf and saw a few of those. He also saw a tree with leaves shaped like green puffballs, and he knew there wasn’t anything like it in the Pacific Northwest. The air was chilly but fresh, and when they rode in the sun, Ward was plenty warm in his wool coat and hat. They’d passed a few travelers, usually slower-moving with wagons, and everyone had been pleasant or, at worst, standoffish.

The wooden bridge was very weathered, but the planks were thick, old hardwood, and it felt very solid under Nutmeg’s hooves as they crossed. On the other side, Haley handed Ward a slice of her travel bread, then picked up the pace again, moving past a trot into a canter for a while, and Ward groaned as the pounding on his lower half ensued. Grace appeared, effortlessly jogging alongside Nutmeg—he’d banned her from occupying the saddle at the same time as him, unable to reconcile the strange mixture of revulsion and lust her close proximity had evoked. “I know you’re hurting, but your form’s looking a lot better.”

“Thanks,” he said. He’d stopped trying to hide his conversations with Grace when Haley was around. The girl was very accepting of them, almost to the point where Ward thought she might be amused by his one-sided conversations.

“Pretty smart of her to think of using healing salve to speed up your recovery. It should help you find your riding stamina much more quickly.”

“Does it work like that, though? Like, if I lifted weights and got sore, then used some salve to heal quickly, would I get the same gains as someone who healed naturally?”

“I don’t know why not.” Grace shrugged. “We didn’t have *anima*-rich potions and concoctions back on Earth. It’s funny to look back at all the times my hosts dabbled with alchemy and herbalism—some things worked, but others did nothing, and I wonder if it was due to the lack of *anima*. I wonder if some of those recipes came from worlds like this.” Suddenly, she was gone, then she spoke from behind him. “Can I please ride back here? I’ll sit back a few inches, see? You can’t even feel me, right?”

“Yeah, it’s fine.”

While Grace was speaking, Haley slowed a little, so she rode beside him on the left. Over the sound of their hooves pounding, she said, voice pitched to carry, “Talking to Grace?”

“Yep.” When she continued to stare, he sighed and said, “She thinks you’re smart, suggesting the healing salve.”

Haley grinned. “I like Grace.”

“I like her too.” When Ward didn’t say anything, Grace prodded him in the ribs.

“She likes you too, Haley.” He groaned. In an effort to change the subject and head off having to relay message after message from Grace, he glanced down at Haley’s saddle where her father’s sword hung. “You know how to use a sword?”

“Not really. I’m going to learn, though.”

“What about your, uh, Gopah?”

“There’s a related art, Gopahdo, which focuses on the sword.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yep. The art of the fire blade.”

“Is that something you can learn without going to a class or something?”

“I’ll need to find a master in the next city and request some training. I know there are ways to apply the Gopah styles to the blade, so I think I’ll be a quick study. Still, I know I can’t become skilled overnight. I hope to learn some basics in the next city and practice them as we travel. When we return to the city or visit a new one, I’ll seek further instruction, and so on.”

“Sounds good.” Ward nodded.

“Ask her if you can learn, too! You need to work on your fighting skills.”

“Hey! I feel like I’ve done pretty damn well so far . . .”

Haley laughed, saying, “Grace wants you to practice with me.”

Ward sighed. “Yeah.”

“I would love to have a sparring partner! It will be good for you! You can’t rely on magic yet, Ward. You don’t know enough spells, nor do you have enough *anima*.”

“Hey! How do you know how much *anima* I have?”

“Well, you described how you felt after casting the secret-finding spell.”

“Oh shit! That reminds me. I learned a new spell.” Ward switched his reins to his left hand and pulled his knife from its sheath. The blade faintly vibrated in his hand, and there was a shimmer in the air around it as he held it up, displaying it to Haley. “It’s enchanted to do a lot of damage on the next thing it hits. See the runes? Those are the words of power.”

“That’s . . . incredible! Can you cast it on my father’s sword?”

“I don’t know why not.” Ward grinned, thankful for the conversation—he’d almost forgotten about his aching tailbone for a few moments. “When we stop, I’ll give it a try. Sound good?”

“Sounds very good.” She smiled, turned back to the road, and rode quietly for a few minutes. As they rounded a bend and came into view of a vast stretch of golden grain and the dozens of farmers working to harvest it, she looked back at him. “I appreciate you sticking with me. You

would have been within reason to tell me I had too many problems to bother with. I mean, it's one thing to help me hunt the murderer of my parents; it's another to fly out of town at a moment's notice."

"Well, I was ready to leave, and I didn't want to lose my partner so soon. We've barely gotten started on our adventuring career."

That brought an even brighter smile to her face. "Adventuring partners." She nodded. "I like it." She pointed ahead, past the distant edge of the grain field. "See that low, dark line on the horizon?"

"Yep."

"That's the greenbelt around the Gravelwash. Children's Crossing is there. You're almost done for the day, partner!"

Ward laughed. "Thank God."

She smiled, reaching forward to loop some of Wind Queen's mane around her fingers. "We'll buy the horses some restorative oats, have the stable hands walk them around for a while, and you can rest for a few hours." She looked at him sideways, one eyebrow cocked. "Sound good?"

"Sounds like you thought things through plenty."

"Yeah. I think if we get enough of a lead from here, Sonder's men will give up. There are too many destinations to the north! He surely can't afford to pay them to pursue us much further."

"Doesn't seem like it, but then I don't know exactly what that sword is worth. Or, you know, the other stuff you took."

"Just my mother's jewels." She frowned and shrugged, then added, "I guess there's also the mine shares and all the glories I took from their safe in town here."

"What?" Suddenly, Ward was dialed in, and everything else was background noise.

"Well, they owned quite a few shares of Tarnish Central Mine, and they had about ten thousand glories in the safe with the certificates." She slapped one of her big saddlebags. "When Sonder's men chased me off the property, I rode straight to town, but I stopped by our townhouse before I came to get you." Ward must have been frowning because she hurriedly asked, "Are you angry? Is it too much risk?"

"Nah, forget it. I'd do the same damn thing. No way I'd let some cousin get his mitts on my parent's things." He thought about it for a moment, then added, "Well, if they owed him money . . ."

"He's exaggerating the debt! I know he is! I couldn't find my parents' copies of the documents, but that doesn't mean anything. What if he's making the whole thing up?"

"You think he could do that?"

"With the county reeve in his pocket? Yes!"

“Is that what Tarnish is? A county?”

“No, Copper Valley is the county. Tarnish is just the city.”

“Are we still in Copper Valley?”

“No, we’re in Granite. It’s a large county that stretches for a week’s travel to the north and east.”

“That’s right. We’re riding toward Port Granite right now, aren’t we?”

“Yes! A few days north of us.”

“Okay, so this Reeve is a county official? But he probably answers to the Marshal who’s supposedly on his way to investigate your parents’ murder, right?”

“Not exactly ‘answers to.’ He definitely would respect his authority, though.”

“Damn it!” Ward growled, barely hearing her as his mind started making connections he didn’t like.

“What? Why are you worried about the Marshal . . .”

“No, that’s not it. I’m just thinking about this whole mess with your cousin and the ‘debt’ he’s claiming against your parents. It’s all too damn convenient for him. If I hadn’t already gotten a confession from Foyle about who hired the killers . . .” he trailed off, annoyed at the thing in his gut that told him to turn around and figure out what Sonder Yates had to do with Haley’s parent’s murders.

Haley waved to a woman lashing bundles of long grain stalks; they’d slowed the horses to a walk as the distant green band of foliage grew larger. “You think Sonder would . . . but we’re sure it was Nevkin, right?”

“I’m sure Foyle gave Nevkin the names of the men who attacked us. Shit. Goddamn it. There were the two men who jumped me and then one who attacked your home. What if they were hired separately?”

“Seems like a big coincidence,” Grace said from behind Ward, breaking her long silence.

“It would be a coincidence, but not as big as it seems,” Ward said, answering Grace but also sounding out his thoughts. “We were in the catacombs for a long time. Sonder might have decided that it was time to make his move on your parents because you and your brother were missing and presumed dead. Meanwhile, Nevkin knew we might come out, but not when. He might have hired the two thugs who jumped me while Sonder hired the other guy, the one I killed by your house. The only coincidence was that the one guy attacked your house a day or two before I got jumped.”

“Ward!” Haley grabbed his arm, her whole mind finally having wrapped itself around the entire idea. “Sonder killed my parents! That scum! That filth! I’ll rip his spleen from . . .”

“Hold on, hold on, Haley. We don’t know that yet, but we’ve definitely got some thinking to do. I’m suddenly not so sure we want to outrun these men. How close is your cousin to his henchmen? If we captured one or two and . . .”

“They might know something!” She nodded enthusiastically.

“Ward, this is a bad idea,” Grace said, suddenly resting a warm hand on his shoulder, squeezing gently, sending a tingle down his spine at the pleasant pressure. “We need to keep moving, not get caught up in this girl’s family feud and legal drama.”

“You want me to leave her?” Ward didn’t bother trying to hide the question; it was time Haley realized Grace wasn’t always on her side.

“She wants . . .”

Grace growled, “No! But can’t you talk her out of it?” Her gentle pressure on his trapezius tightened, almost painfully so.

Ward looked at Haley and sighed, suddenly regretting his spur-of-the-moment decision to expose Grace’s more heartless side. “She doesn’t want me to leave you. She wants me to talk you out of going back to mess with your cousin.” Grace’s squeeze relaxed as she let go, shoving him almost petulantly. When he turned to frown at her, she was gone.

Haley had gotten quiet, but she nodded. “Maybe she’s right. Maybe I should be satisfied that you killed the man who wielded the blade.” Her voice was small, and Ward knew it took a lot for her to say that. Was she afraid he’d leave her? Was she giving up just because he’d run his dumb mouth?

“Nah, screw that. If that punk had your parents killed, we’re going to get justice one way or another.”

Haley looked up at him, and Ward could tell she was fighting to keep her face neutral. “We don’t have to, Ward . . .”

“Hey, relax; I’m sorry I said that. Grace didn’t say to leave you, just that we should keep moving. You know, it’s different when she’s talking to me ‘cause she knows I know her. You lose the real meaning when I say things to her out of context. She wouldn’t tell me to leave you, all right? She wanted me to keep you focused on the journey, the adventure, you know? She’s upset about what happened to your folks, too, but she thinks facing those problems is hard on you.” Ward was talking out of his ass, but he felt like Haley had been kind of crushed to think Grace might try to get him to ditch her, and he felt like a jerk for suggesting it.

“Really? She’s . . . she’s just worried about me?”

“Yeah, of course.”

Suddenly, Grace was back, leaning close to his back, speaking into his ear, “I forgive you.”

“Well, um, Grace,” Haley said, looking around, unsure where to direct her words.

“She’s behind me.”

“Grace, thanks for worrying about me.”

“Just don’t get yourself so tied up in the past that you lose sight of your future. Many have lost their freedom or their lives pursuing vengeance.” Ward didn’t immediately repeat her words, so Grace nudged him. “Tell her!”

“Right,” Ward cleared his throat, “She says to be careful with vengeance; it’s best served cold or something . . . Ouch!” Ward slapped a hand to his ear, far too late to stop Grace from cuffing it painfully. “Okay, okay,” he said as she lifted her hand. He knew she could basically teleport all around him, and he’d never know where the next blow would come from. “She said to remember your dreams and not lose track of them pursuing a nightmare.” He knew he was paraphrasing or, perhaps, rephrasing her words, but he tried his best under the pressure of Grace’s repeated threats. “She says many people lost their freedom for vengeance, um, don’t let that be you.”

“I won’t, Grace!” Haley laughed, and when Ward finally felt sure Grace wouldn’t hit him again, he lowered his hands from his ears.

“We need to figure a way for you two to talk directly.”

“I’d love that!” Haley’s eyes grew wide with excitement, but then she turned away from Ward and pointed, “The Gravelwash!” Ward looked forward and saw that they’d crested a very gentle rise and that the road ahead descended toward a tremendously wide, placid river. Trees were thick on the sides of the road, but they grew denser toward the river. The road was broad and branched like a multi-pronged Y to the left and right, each narrower track leading to various wooden buildings. Ward saw a mill with a wide paddled wheel hanging in the river; he saw a building with large corrals, a building that had to be the inn with its many gables and large wraparound deck, and he saw half a dozen other, smaller buildings that might be shops or homes or both.

The main branch of the road veered to the right and passed the stable and inn on its way to the shore of the sluggish blue-green river. Ward could see rafts out on the water, many occupied by people with long poles, clearly fishing. Still other, larger rafts, laden with beasts and cargo, plied the shallow waters, hauling people back and forth to the far shore. Despite all the rafts and small boats, Ward saw plenty of people riding or swimming through the water. He saw a horse near the middle, and the water barely came to the rider’s stirrups.

“I don’t think children should cross that river!” Grace announced. “It’s got to be a few miles across, and it’s deeper than I imagined!”

Ward laughed and looked at Haley. “Grace thinks this is a poorly named crossing. She wouldn’t let any children in her care swim that river.”

“She’s very protective. That’s why. She’d be an excellent mother.”

Ward sighed, rubbing his temples. “Let’s just get down there. I need to get out of this saddle. In fact,” Ward grunted, standing on one stirrup to swing his leg over the horse and down to the ground, “I’ll just walk ol’ Nutmeg from here.”

“Not a bad idea. These poor animals have been working hard since midnight.” Haley followed him down to the road, pulling her lead to join him on the right side as a cart laden with bundles of something that looked like colorful carrots trundled past.

“Place looks busy.” Ward eyed the many animals in the stable corral. “Probably a good spot to ask around for rumors or sightings of Nevkin. Wish we had a picture . . .”

“He’s not hard to describe!” Haley laughed.

Ward grinned, nodding, picturing their quarry’s bald, tattooed head. “Even without the silver tongue and the maniac’s voice.”

“Maniac . . .” Haley’s laughter had trailed off to a giggle, which persisted as she repeated the word. “A perfect word to describe how he sounded!”

“Yep.” Ward started walking, stiffly at first but more smoothly as his aching joints limbered up a little. He wasn’t looking forward to confronting the posse Sonder Yates had chasing Haley, but he was kind of glad for the excuse not to ride so hard going forward. “We need to pick up some healing tonics. The stronger, the better. Something tells me I’m going to be casting my reveal secrets spell.”